

**The Manichæan Body:  
Rebecca Belmore's Art Making in the Context of Socially Responsive Activist Art**

**Irmela Agnes Dmytruk**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Manichæan Body: Rebecca Belmore's Art Making in the Context of Socially Responsive Activist Art**

Irmela Agnes Dmytruk

This thesis positions Rebecca Belmore's art making as a ritual space of concern for the socially constructed marginalized other. With processes that are as much personal and private as they are political and public, her art production reacts to societal injustices, and aims to expose transgressions and violations, in particular those involving women, the environment, and spirituality, in reference to her Aboriginal identity, thus linking considerations of race, class and gender.

Her performances and installations construct a social sculpture, anchored in the lived body as site of experience, referring both to her own body and to the body politic. With the Manichæan Body as a model for negotiating conflicting dualisms that shape social structures, her works are aesthetic and at the same time ethical strategies for transformation and social change. Conflict and violence as unavoidable realities of personal and political space, can be mediated by opening sites for concern, participation, and engagement, on intra- and interpersonal levels.

Belmore's art making connects her to other activist artists working in the field of socially responsive public art -and in particular Suzanne Lacy- who has addressed issues of social justice and the violation and marginalization of those who are different.

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**This is for Sacha  
another activist of a different sort,  
my son, my teacher, my future.**

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**Participating in the system does not mean that we must identify with it,  
stop criticizing it, or stop improving the little piece of turf on which we operate.**

**Anonymous.**

In 1999 Rebecca Belmore wrote her **Manifesto** (Fig. 1). During a twelve-hour performance she created an installation: a pile of pencil shavings and a stack of papers covered with text. These objects were tangible recordings of a running commentary on her process, transmitted via microphone to a temporary and transient public passing the plate glass window of a Queen Street W. storefront in Toronto. It proved to be an intensive and at the same time extensive act of self-inquiry. Not unlike a self-referential psychotherapeutic process of active imagination, Belmore simultaneously spoke and listened to her own monologue while writing it. Rather than create permanent meaning with words (spoken or written), she wanted to create an image of herself as a writer through the corporeal act of writing. She says of this work: "*Manifesto* is a place to hear the sound of my own writing. It is a private inner place made public."<sup>1</sup> For Belmore this performance was a way of writing identity.

In this thesis I will consider the work of Rebecca Belmore within the context of socially responsive Activist/Public Art. Primarily with installations and performances, she reacts to issues of injustice and concern involving women, the environment, and spirituality, in reference to her Aboriginal identity. *The Named and the Unnamed*, her 2003 exhibition, is indexical for the concepts addressed throughout her work; it specifically highlights the consequences of violence for the socially constructed dimensions of what is designated *other*: Women, Native and the environment. For

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Belmore's solo performance took place on March 28, 1999 at the Zsa Zsa Gallery, 962 Queen Street West, Toronto. Toronto: Fado Performance Inc. 1999  
<http://www.performanceart.ca/time3x/belmore/home.html>.

Belmore this discourse marks the parameters of a performative space, where she builds a social sculpture, an aesthetic manifestation of social activism that is inherently ethical. Her work, anchored in the lived body, functions in an active social space between ethics and aesthetics.

By establishing a philosophical framework from theories in Cultural Studies, Post-colonialism, and Feminism, this thesis examines the ways in which socio-political agendas, related to race, class and gender, operate in private and public dimensions. I will introduce pertinent concepts like Hannah Arendt's "active participation in political discourse," Elizabeth Grosz' "volatile body," and Stuart Hall's "ambivalent process of identification through difference, the Other." I am particularly interested in the concept of "art as conversation" supported by Homi Bhabha's idiom of "contextual contingency" where binary and polarized conceptions of public and private are negotiated in the public sphere. Drawing on a variety of writers from art-historical, socio-political and psycho-social fields like Mary Jane Jacob, Rosalyn Deutsche, Miwon Kwon, Lucy Lippard, Suzi Gablik, and Suzanne Lacy among others, this thesis addresses the social relevance of art making.

I hypothesize in this thesis that participatory art, as presented by Belmore and other artists working in the field of socially relevant art, creates an active ritual space that can be instrumental in bridging the gaps between conflicting perceptions, binaries that divide experience on many levels. A Manichæan world, as introduced by Charlotte Townsend-Gault, the curator of Belmore's *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition, is defined by antagonistic tendencies of good and evil, which motivate and affect people's behaviors and actions. Belmore's work, in Townsend-Gault's view, makes clear

assertions about the wrongs and violations that transpire in the public realm, in particular those affecting the marginalized other.<sup>2</sup> Borrowing a concept from Jason BeDuhn, the Manichæan Body describes a model for mediating the dualisms implicated in shaping social structure, the transformative action that attempts to reconcile polarized positions.<sup>3</sup> In this thesis this concept refers to the active space where Belmore takes a stand and speaks out, where she negotiates private and public identities and proposes public debate. The Manichæan Body inserts ethics into the tangible reality of a lived body, positioned within social, political, and spiritual realities.

No major work has yet been written about Belmore's oeuvre. Research information about the artist has been gained from primary sources like artist files, personal interviews and correspondence with the artist and curators of her exhibitions, as well as pertinent articles in books, journals, catalogues, and the Internet. Equally, information about other artists in the field of socially relevant public art, and in particular Suzanne Lacy has been found in primary and secondary literature and the Internet. Several Masters and PhD theses written about public art in a social context, as well as activist art were relevant to the topic. The central theme of Belmore's art production, as outlined in the Introduction, is the definition and construction of identity, an inherently private process of fashioning the self that is activated by performances and installations in public space. With the process of 'making identities' across various levels of experience, her work intends to transgress the 'margins of mimesis', and assert difference and diversity.

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault and James Luna. Rebecca Belmore. The Named and the Unnamed. Vancouver: The University of British-Columbia. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2002. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Jason David BeDuhn . The Manichæan Body In Discipline and Ritual. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

## Identities

Identity as the “ground of action,” in the view of Stuart Hall, is a psychosocial discourse of the self, and it is to be negotiated across paradoxical meanings and concepts.<sup>4</sup> Creating identity is an ongoing process of mediating different aspects of one’s experience on personal and collective levels, and it is manifested by active engagement with the physical reality of the lived body in the world. Belmore expresses this in **A Way of Making**. (Fig. 2). The title of this performance presented by *Fado* in Toronto in 2003<sup>5</sup> illustrates how creating identity is distinctly connected to her hands and to a process of crafting objects. A collaborative work with Bentley Spang, a Native artist like Belmore herself, it aimed to explore issues of communication and boundaries by way of both artists interacting with their hands. Reona Brass, the curator of the project, talked of their performance as a ritual of “fashioning a new self within the cultural body.” She concluded that Belmore’s work “ultimately serves as crucial indicator in the rapid and continual renegotiation of contemporary indigenous identity.”<sup>6</sup> Most of Belmore’s early works were expressions of the intent to re-connect to her Native heritage, attempts to come to terms with an identity that was suspended between two cultures. For her, both her grandmother’s traditional lifestyle in Sioux Lookout in Northern Ontario and her

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall. “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” In Culture, Globalization and the World-System. Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 42+.

<sup>5</sup> Fado is a non-profit artist-run center for performance art based in Toronto. The only center of this kind in English Canada, it has been in operation since 1993 with Paul Couillard acting as Performance Art Curator. Fado’s mandate is to provide a stable, ongoing and supportive forum for creating and presenting performance art. Fado does not operate a permanent venue, but secures space for performances on a project-by-project basis. <http://www.performanceart.ca/about.html>. This performance by Rebecca Belmore and Bentley Spang was part of a weeklong artist residency at the *Ontario College of Art and Design*, Toronto in March 2003. Toronto: Fado Performance Inc. 2003  
<http://www.performanceart.ca/making/home.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

mother's North-American mainstream life in the Thunder Bay/Ontario area were defined by how the women worked with their hands.<sup>7</sup>

**A Way of Making** (Fig. 2) –mute manual manipulations- and equally **Manifesto** (Fig. 1) -pencil shavings and piled-up paper- anchor the process of identification at the juncture of the symbolic pre-verbal and the verbal; in the space where meaning is created through form and language, where giving form to objects and the body is intrinsically linked to communication. When describing the corporeal process of creating herself as sculptural installation, Belmore talked about the symbolism of the color white, and the significance of an all-white environment. For her, the image of wearing white clothes, seated at a white-clad table in a white room, was the embodiment of the institutionalized white cube concept of art making. She said:

The space had white walls and all the symbols we associate with art; I liked being institutionalized, locked up in the gallery so to speak.<sup>8</sup>

Whiteness in this context demarcates the artistic process made public; whiteness as a marker of identity delimits ethnicity and race. The manifestation of identity has acutely motivated Belmore's art making where a personal process of individuation parallels creating herself as an artist; asserting identity in reference to a public meant identifying with her cultural heritage. Native of the Anishinabe Nation, this genealogy situates her in a marginalized societal place, however with an activist political and spiritual commitment to socially relevant art, she holds a central place of agency. By

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<sup>7</sup> In the epigraph of a 1991 autobiographical artist statement Belmore writes: "I have with me the influence of my Kokum (grandmother) and my mother. I can see their hands at work. Hands swimming through the water, moving earth and feeling sky: warms hands. I can see their hands touching hide, cloth and bead creating color beauty: work hands. I look at my hands and I am aware of their hands. That is how I wish to work." Belmore, Rebecca. "Autonomous Aboriginal High-Tech Teepee Trauma Mama." *Canadian Theatre Review* 68 (Fall 1991). 44.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Belmore, interview with Paul Couillard, January 18, 2000. Toronto. Toronto: Fado Performance Inc. 2000. <http://www.performanceart.ca/time3x/belmore/home.html>.

actualizing identity through creative and corporeal ritual processes, constructed by gender and by ethnicity, she proposes to bring the margins into the center.

Belmore's exploration of identity influenced her decision to drop out of the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, and return to her small hometown community in Upsala near Thunder Bay in Northern Ontario. When only one elderly woman came to see her first exhibition of drawings at a Native community center this type of exhibition turned out to be her last. She realized that she did not want to exhibit objects made in isolation, but chose instead to explore more immediate forms of artistic expression. It can be argued that the Modernist tradition installs commodified high art in museums and galleries where the works are inaccessible to many groups of people, in particularly First Nations who are often geographically and socio-economically marginalized. Installation and performance media can allow for a more direct access to the audience, and Belmore wanted to make art for and with the public, its message clearly visible and readable, and effective in responding to social/cultural and economical/political community concerns.

Learning about Ojibwa traditions and values fostered her interest in socially engaged and conceptual art making. Inter-generational transmission, through her grandmother who still lived on a Native reserve, became instrumental for identification with a way of life close to nature. She was inspired by the way work was done with the hands, and how artistic expression was evident in everyday life. Not speaking each other's language, communication for grandmother and granddaughter was predominantly non-verbal and required translation. Belmore's works reflect an interest in language as a malleable medium, where words without meaning are heard like music; using Anishinabe

titles for many of her pieces, she translates from one culture to another by exploring dimensions of language and narrative.

Stuart Hall has described this process of identification as “the search for roots, [...] when learning to speak the language of that which is home [...].”<sup>9</sup> And he believes that to resist marginalization and exclusion the margins have to begin to speak, and the untold stories have to be told.<sup>10</sup> Story telling is a viable means of identifying and relating, of making sense; this is something that has been integrated in daily life in cultures with oral traditions. Many of Belmore’s pieces are recreating such opportunities for narrative and dialogue, while giving voice to others has helped her to find her own voice. A 1992 installation for the *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibition at the National Gallery in Ottawa, brought the voices of eight Native women from her Northern Ontario community into the Ottawa gallery. *Mahu-che-witoowin: A Gathering of People for any Purpose*, a circular arrangement of these women’s favourite chairs, each equipped with a set of headphones, allowed visitors to listen to the stories the women had to tell. The eight chairs, which were lent and later returned to their owners in a gesture of a true temporality of art, illustrated the cultural context. They replicated the settings –contingent, often alienating and drab, yet intimately supportive- within which women choose to talk to each other. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to ‘sit in their seats’ –to allegorically ‘walk in their moccasins’- and the absence of the women themselves, replaced by a succession of seated visitors, constructed a place of encounter, a model that demonstrated, that ultimately ‘you are the other myself.’

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<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall. “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” In Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 53.

A sense of empathy motivates Belmore to become involved. Her visual commentaries aim to expose injustices suffered by people, and especially so where it concerns the marginalization and oppression of Native people. She participated in the protests against the controversial *The Spirit Sings* (also dubbed ‘the spirit sinks’ or ‘the spirit sighs’) exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in 1988. Presented as the flagship exhibition for the Calgary Olympic Games, it had been contested by the Lubicon Cree on the grounds that its sponsor Shell Oil was drilling for oil in spite of unsettled land claims. The Band opposed the company’s unfair corporate practices, which, overriding legal decisions, was contributing to the destruction of their economy and traditional way of life. Belmore, the ‘artist as artifact,’ posed wrapped in blankets as *Exhibit 671B* alongside the Transcanada Highway near Thunder Bay -in sub-zero temperatures- to protest not only public and environmental violations, but policies of museum practice as well.<sup>11</sup>

For Belmore and many other Native artists art institutions like museums and galleries are ‘tombs;’<sup>12</sup> they deem these exhibition places inadequate and ineffective, by presenting Native peoples as historical rather than as participants in today’s socio-political debates. Raymond Williams suggested the term “culture-sepultures.”<sup>13</sup> His notion of “culture is ordinary” presents a societal model where art (and learning), “the special processes of discovery and creative effort” are equally accessible to all, and will

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<sup>11</sup> Post-colonial museum practices have begun to respect a different perception about collecting and ownership, and First Nation’s demands concerning their appropriated material culture have led to re-examination of the ethnographic collections, and the return of many ‘artifacts’ to their communities. In most Native cultures, art was not static or separate from everyday experience, and ceremonial objects functioned integrated in a spiritual/sacred function within the group.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Yuxweluptun, a Native artist working with ironical surrealist large-scale paintings to address issues of Native stereotypical representation as well as the environment, has called them ‘Indian morgues.’

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams. “Culture is Ordinary.” In *The Politics of Culture: Policy Perspective for Individuals, Institutions, and Communities*. Eds. Gigi Bradford, Michael Gary and Glenn Wallach. New York: The New Press, 2000. 19.

affect social change.<sup>14</sup> In the view of many artists, among them a wide cross-section of First Nations artists, art has to be publicly evident and respond to current political and community concerns. And Aboriginal artists, in the words of Joan Acland, “have effectively worked to reform and restructure the social context in which Native people live. They have addressed elided histories and concomitantly composed new and emergent subject positions for First Peoples [...]”<sup>15</sup>

### **Margins**

Belmore’s work is as public and political as it is specific and personal; her installations and performances identify and give names to people from Aboriginal communities, and to their experiences of injustice. She made *A Blanket for Sarah*<sup>16</sup> in remembrance of a native street person who froze to death in Sioux Lookout, Belmore’s Northern Ontario community. Her empathetic gesture, a hand-crafted object made from 800.000 pine needles inserted into the holes of a 7'X9' window screen, was a labor-intensive private process as much as a public statement about social predicaments.

*For Dudley* publicized a 1995 event; the Stoney Point Band protesting denied land claims and aboriginal treaty rights in the Ipperwash area in Ontario. It particularly commemorated the person of Dudley George, one of a group of unarmed Native protesters that included women and children, who was fatally shot by a police officer. During the performance of *For Dudley* at the *7A\*11D Performance Art Festival* in 1997,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 17.

<sup>15</sup> Joan Reid Acland. First Nations Artists in Canada: A Biographical/Bibliographical Guide, 1960-1999. Montreal: The Gail and Stephen A. Jarislawsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, 2001. XIII.

<sup>16</sup> *A Blanket for Sarah* a collaborative work with Belmore’s sister Florence and other volunteers was created for a 1994 exhibition at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. O’Rourke, Debbie. “An Artist in the New Wilderness: Interventions by Rebecca Belmore.” *Espace* 42 (Winter 1997/98): 29.

Belmore offered her personalized and emphatic rendition of the destructive violation of the living environment when she repeatedly stabbed a small tree sapling with a hunting knife. Debbie O'Rourke described the impact of the dramatic and emotional performance on a sophisticated Toronto art audience, and highlighted Belmore's "finesse in manipulating overblown emotionality and twisting cliché for her own purposes."<sup>17</sup>

By personalizing the tragic deaths of 17 year-old Neil Stonechild and four other Native men, Belmore wanted to expose an ongoing cynical Saskatoon police practice of 'Starlight Tours', where (Native) drunkards were left on the outskirts of town to sober up. The men had died when they had been abandoned at below-zero temperatures and frozen to death, victims of an ill-conceived attempt at re-education and addressing social problems. Belmore's *The Indian Factory* at *High Tech Storytellers: An Interdisciplinary Arts Festival* in Saskatoon/Saskatchewan in 2000 dramatically brought home to the audience, how abuse against Aboriginal people still continues on a regular basis.<sup>18</sup>

To restructure the social context of marginalization in Native communities, political and social issues, and especially the ramifications of alcoholism and substance abuse have to be addressed. Alcoholism as one of the signs of affliction and hopelessness across Native communities needs to be understood in the wider sense of what can be instrumental in healing disease. Many Aboriginal voices critique the loss of inherent community support, diminished by the impact of societal changes, often involving the mass media. Alcoholism, like any addiction, requires treatments beyond medicalization,

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<sup>17</sup> *7A\*IID Performance Art Festival*, Symptom Hall, Toronto, August 1997. In Debbie O'Rourke. "An Artist in the New Wilderness. Interventions by Rebecca Belmore. *Espace 42*. Winter 1997-1998. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Belmore's performance at *High Tech Storytellers: An Interdisciplinary Arts Festival* at the AKA Gallery in Saskatoon in June 2000. In Lynn Hughes and Marie-Josée Lafortune. *Penser L'Indiscipline. Recherches Interdisciplinaires en art contemporain. Creative Con/Fusions. Interdisciplinary Practices in Contemporary Art*. Montréal: Optica, 2001. 95-101.

aimed at replacing alienation and isolation with a sense of purpose and belonging. Jeannette Armstrong was one of the Native voices calling for a re-examination of traditional values; she considered a re-integration into community essential for healing societal imbalances. “Our one skin,” a term from her Okanagan culture, emphasized a corporeal sense of belonging essential for positive identification with a community.<sup>19</sup>

The assertion of a distinct collective cultural identity, belonging to a certain group and the resulting exclusion of others, raises questions of where to situate boundaries without privileging some and discriminating the ‘others’ as inferior. Belmore worked through notions of boundaries and borders in a piece she made ‘on site’ for the *Insite97* public art exhibition. Held in locations in both San Diego and Tijuana, two towns divided by the US/Mexican border, it addressed social issues in view of the physical and psychological significance of the border.<sup>20</sup> Dot Tuer suggested that Belmore’s entry *Awasinake (On the Other Side)* highlighted the border as “site of cultural dislocation.”<sup>21</sup>, By way of its medium this photographic work addressed issues of power; it also proposed taking a look at the appropriative ethnographic practice of ‘taking’ photographs of people for a small fee. When Belmore photographed one of the many impoverished Mexican women in Tijuana, who was trying to make enough money to be smuggled across the border for a better life and a better paying job in the U.S., she paid her model generously.

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<sup>19</sup> Jeanette Armstrong. “Sharing One Skin. Okanagan Community.” In Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. Eds. The Case Against the Global Economy. And for a Turn Toward the Local. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996. 465.

<sup>20</sup> Writing about *Insite97*, which included site-specific works by more than forty artists from various countries, Dot Tuer describes the border as “a line in the sand, a state of mind, a political reality, a cultural metaphor. As a site, it resonates with a layering of dislocations and exchanges, a reshaping of languages, ideologies, and histories.” Dot Tuer. “At the Gates. Steel and Barbwire Cut a Swath Between the US and Mexico: The Art of Insite97 Takes the Border as its Subject.” Canadian Art 15, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 73.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 78.

The photo personified the woman as a casualty of local economical inequality and hardship worsened by globalization and Free Trade policies. For the exhibition, the image was installed on the marquee of an inner city movie theater building on the ‘other side’ of the border. The woman’s portrait, mounted sideways like a running filmstrip, gave visibility to her anonymity and namelessness. It recorded the kinship Belmore felt with this person, borders, and cultural and language barriers notwithstanding. Indigenous and belonging to a marginalized group like Belmore herself, she showed a surprising resemblance to the artist, and became her alter ego, the other/myself. Stuart Hall has described this process:

This is the Other that belongs inside one. This is the Other that one can only know from the place from which one stands. This is the Self as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other. And this notion which breaks down the boundaries, between outside and inside, between those who belong and those who do not, between those whose histories have been written and those whose histories they have depended on but whose histories cannot be spoken.<sup>22</sup>

Belmore however takes up the challenge of enunciation, of speaking ‘her-story’ with visible signs. She included the woman’s photograph in her 1999 solo exhibition **Nibiwe/behzig, many/one, \_/\_** (Fig. 3a) at *Galerie Optica* in Montreal. Working with repetition and binary opposites of white/colored, the piece spoke about contrasts; a horizontal band of light-boxes suspended the unidentified woman’s multiplied linear image above eye-level, opposite a corresponding horizontal line-up of hundreds of small white plaster casts (Fig. 3b). It addressed feminist and racial concerns, stereotypes that can get in the way of communication and sisterhood. Viewing the portrait would require tilting one’s head, a necessary shift in direction and consciousness. Now a generic ‘other-

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<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall. “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” In Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 48.

image,' it became an icon, when the artist lit a candle in front of her portraits during the vernissage. A solemn gesture, which stood in contrast to the lively music played by a Mexican mariachi band Belmore had hired spontaneously the night before in the streets of Montreal.

Belmore's concept of identity, although grounded in her Ojibwa roots is not exclusive, because it includes all people, Native and non-Native. Constructing a collective identity -imagining community- has been described by Homi Bhabha as the "spatial expression of a unitary people."<sup>23</sup> It is, in his view, not monolithic, but rather a complex, liminal, and temporally determined process of cultural differentiation, a production of "the double-edged discourse of social territories and temporalities."<sup>24</sup> And Bhabha suggested to

Question that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion -the many as one- shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community [...].<sup>25</sup>

The expression of a particular identity is motivated by creating certainty, and identifying with those that are the same (or at least similar), of the same class and kin; to be familiar is comforting and empowering. Yet, the margins of mimesis delimit identity not only by conformity and sameness, but even more so by difference. Stuart Hall explained "identity is always in the process of formation, and is always constructed through ambivalence and splitting between that which one is, and that which is the

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<sup>23</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. Ed. "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation. In Nation and Narration. London: Routledge, 1990. 294.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 320.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 294.

other.”<sup>26</sup> Identity in his view requires constant adjustments of positions and beliefs; it is a personal process of ongoing communication and dialogue with others. And, as Marilyn Burgess has remarked, “no collectivity is monolithic. Differences exist within shared identity categories.”<sup>27</sup>

Concerned with personal and societal injustice, Belmore’s work deals with social realities rather than generalities, and it emphasizes relationship. Raymond Williams wrote: “an effective awareness of social identity depends on actual and sustained social relationships.” For Williams these “lived, worked and placeable social identities,” of “actual lives in knowable communities”, were a way of identifying and making sense within the abstract anonymity of wider national identities.<sup>28</sup> With meaningful relationships as a forum for negotiating difference, building identity is not only a developmental time-sequential process, but spatially anchored in a place of action.

Stuart Hall talked about how “our lives have been transformed by the struggle of the margins to come into representation,” and that “paradoxically [...] marginality has become a powerful space.”<sup>29</sup> The reversal of power structures, where the margins shift into a central position of agency, depends on demarcating space for dynamic discourse, on negotiating boundaries and exchanging positions. It requires a public space where recognizing and naming the ‘other’ places the action into the site of a relationship.

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<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall. “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” In Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 47-48.

<sup>27</sup> Burgess, Marilyn. “The Imagined Geographies of Rebecca Belmore.” Parachute 93 (March 1999): 18.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Hall. “Cultural, Community, Nation.” Cultural Studies 7, 3 (October 1983):

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall. “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity.” In Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 34.

This thesis considers Belmore's art making as a performative ritual space where she constructs a social sculpture from the "old and new identities,"<sup>30</sup> anchored in the corporeal presence of the body, her own and that of the body politic. I suggest that her production connects her to other activist artists working in the field of socially relevant public art, and in particular, Suzanne Lacy, who -like Belmore- is concerned about social justice and the marginalization of those who are different. Organized into three chapters this thesis aims to present Belmore's artistic process as personal and private, yet inseparable from a public and communal significance. With an activist agenda of making public what are often private incidences of violence, her installations and performances operate in a spatial dimension with the body as the site of experience. Ritual in this context is, for Belmore, not only transformative on intra- and inter-personal levels but also transcendent and part of a spiritual inquiry.

In the first chapter I establish Belmore's work within the context of socially responsive public art at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by introducing several artists including Lacy, who has been -as artist, educator and writer- instrumental for formulating its ideology and mapping out its parameters. Based on the theories of Rosalyn Deutsche and others I aim to show how conflict and violence -an unavoidable fact of personal and political public space- can be negotiated by creating sites for concern, for participatory and engaged art making.

Chapter II presents Belmore's process of constructing identity within a given community, where she creates a space for social ritual with the performative body acting as agent for transformation. By way of introducing the installations and especially the

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<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hall. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In Culture, Globalization and the World-System, Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

performance portion of *The Named and the Unnamed*, a discourse on prostitution is inserted in a framework of feminist theories of the body and the gendered construction of space, with home and the street as markers of cultural geography and locus for community. Especially pertinent in this view are the voice and the act of naming as strategies to address injustice and violence across social, moral, ecological and metaphysical dimensions.

In the third chapter the focus on Belmore's reaction to the environment, the 'land,' will show how a broader concept of marginalization relates to nature and spirituality. I aim to demonstrate how Belmore, with the intent of transforming social meaning through ritual enactment, creates a performative space that is anchored in the physical reality of the body in the environment, and how strategies for bridging binaries are ultimately linked to ethical and spiritual considerations. The quest for non-violence in this sense has to be seen in a wider context of peacemaking and healing relationship.

**Three Weeks in May** (Fig. 4) took place at several locations in the city of Los Angeles for a period of three weeks in 1977. Extensive in duration, range, and purpose, Suzanne Lacy's first major public performance project was intended to make rape visible as a social problem. A feminist investigation into violence perpetrated against women, it not only exposed their victimization, but proposed pro-active strategies as well. Designed to inform and sensitize the community at large, the wide-ranging project included more than 30 media events, performances, ceremonies, and self-defense rallies, and it publicized resources and hot lines in the media. A large city map at the City Hall shopping mall displayed the locations of the incidences of rape that were recorded daily by means of a stamp with the word 'rape.'

In this chapter I will establish the work of Rebecca Belmore within the parameters of socially responsive public art, as a 'site for concern.' A diverse range of art projects reacting to a wide cross section of human-interest issues like environmental degradation, cultural identity, homelessness, aging, and violence against women, these types of art production -predominantly installation and performance media- are expressions of personal and political struggle and concern. Lacy has introduced the alternative term of 'New Genre Public Art' for art making that is socially relevant, that has distinct goals and agendas for social change. It is by her definition

Visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.<sup>1</sup>

For this thesis, Lacy's seminal ideas and theories and her wide-ranging projects and body of work present a context for Belmore's artistic assertion of social critique, and her particular focus on the violation of women exemplified in *The Named and the Unnamed*. Although different in scope and design the works of both artists have an activist agenda; however dissimilar the audiences they are addressing, what they share is the intention to speak and be heard. Art making that is socially and politically engaged - activist art- opens spaces for the democratic project of negotiating differences and creates sites for public debate, for voicing concern. For most artists committed to engaging with social-critical issues this describes the actual function of public art. Participatory art that allows the audience to interact more directly with the work can be instrumental in collapsing the binary subject-object polarization as one of the expressions of a split in consciousness that sets one societal group against another. Through art making that is grounded in the physical reality of the body, divisive categories that favor the 'one' and oppress and marginalize the 'other' can be played out and negotiated. The parameters of public and private dimensions, the individual and the community, in this sense remain mutable and interchangeable, and active in public space.

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 19. Lacy introduced the term *New Genre Public Art* with an anthology of articles describing (predominantly U.S.) artists and their diverse projects.

## Activists

One of the parts of *Three Weeks in May*, **She Who Would Fly** (Fig. 5), was a performance by Lacy and three other artists at the Garage Gallery in Los Angeles. It presented an emotional and corporal rendition of rape, embodied by four nude moaning 'bird women' crouched on a ledge above eye-level, their skin dyed blood red; it also featured a suspended slaughtered lamb carcass with wings. Four street performances titled *The Rape*, **Myths of Rape** (Fig. 6), *All Men are Potential Rapists*, and *Women Fight Back*, addressed stereotypical notions of rape, in particular the double victimization of women who had been raped and were treated suspiciously by the police. Organized by Leslie Labowitz, who had studied activist strategies and methods of street theater with Joseph Beuys in Germany,<sup>2</sup> the performances employed rudimentary yet effective theatrical elements; the 'oppressors' appearing in stiff cardboard Ku Klux Klan costumes, and the blindfolded 'victims' reading aloud the names of raped women, written on their arms.

In the same year in Los Angeles, **In Mourning and in Rage** (1977) (Fig. 7a, b) included a funeral motorcade of 22 cars filled with women, followed by a hearse, and a procession of sixty women in black. A performance on the steps of City Hall featured ten women personifying rape victims dressed in costumes resembling caskets. Coordinated by Lacy in collaboration with Labowitz,<sup>3</sup> this event again dealt with the issue of sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Beuys taught at the *Düsseldorf Akademie für die Kunst* from 1961 to 72, when he was fired from his job for opposing administrative admissions policies, and reinstated in 1978. Beuys wanted art to revolutionize everyday life; especially with Fluxus performances he attempted to change thought and consciousness. His concept of 'social sculpture' proposed an egalitarian societal model for mutual interactive creativity.

<sup>3</sup> Also participating in the event were organizations like *Woman Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW)*, *The Woman's Building*, as well as several members of Rape Crisis Hotlines and City Council, and the Deputy Major.

violence and rape. A political intervention in the media, it was a response to the sensationalist media coverage of the 1977 Hillside Strangler murders, the rape and murder of ten women in suburban Los Angeles. It addressed the biased representation of the women in the media, described as 'prostitutes who attracted' the incidents, reinforcing a Jack the Ripper type of popular myth of sexual violence. Recreating a media event, the performance was meant to empower women by emphasizing their agency, making them appear strong and capable of defending themselves.

Presented like public spectacles, Lacy's projects proposed to examine the circumstance and often hidden motivations precipitating acts of oppression and violence such as domestic abuse, rape, and incest as they are imbedded in mainstream culture and everyday life. With the intention to expose and resolve social injustice and conflict, raise consciousness, and provide opportunities for empowerment, for community, these extensive public events were carefully engineered performances often involving great numbers of participants. The proceedings included large-scale media campaigns, political lobbying, grass-roots community organizing, public relations and networking with people across all levels of society -not only various political groups and activist organizations, but also the media, politicians, and public services departments like the police and City Hall. What made these kinds of art/media events different from political activism and activist actions like demonstrations or rallies is the method of collaboration. Rather than merely confronting those groups in society whose policies they are questioning, the artists involved in the projects worked together with them. As models of political activist art, the object is secondary to the subjective experience of all participants, the process. Nina Felshin has stated that activist art is

Characterized by the innovative use of public space to address issues of socio-political and cultural significance, and to encourage community or public participation as a means of affecting social change.<sup>4</sup>

She explained that this hybrid cultural art praxis springs from “a democratic urge to give voice and visibility to the disenfranchised, and to connect to a wider art audience.”<sup>5</sup>

Giving voice to the marginalized, and making visible the dynamics of oppression has been one of the primary objectives of Belmore’s art making, connecting her to an ever-widening range of audiences. Beginning with her Anishinabe community she has addressed a variety of publics in galleries, university campuses and alternative spaces, and most recently a decidedly sophisticated art audience at the *Art Gallery of Ontario*. Selected to represent Canada at the 2005 *Venice Biennale*, one of the most prestigious international art exhibitions of contemporary art, she will be able to reach an even wider audience. In either setting, her installations and performances with their powerful presence and immediate forms of expression have translated her personal experience, and transmitted her messages of social justice, offering her publics opportunities for consideration and contemplation.

Lacy’s art is the art of human relations, in that she brings people together for meaningful encounter; as activist, educator, and as artist her strategies of community activism aim to educate, inform, and transform. To create relationship is one of the more immediate forms of art making, and Lacy collaborates with other artists and participants in planning and choreographing the events. Collaboration, in the view of Caroline Stevens, is an important aspect of social activism; it constructs a space for participation in

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<sup>4</sup> Nina Felshin. Introduction. In Nina Felshin. *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 11.

creative meaningful activities. The term ‘mattering maps’ asserts the spatial aspect of siting concern -creating sites for issues to be addressed- and as articulated by Lawrence Grossberg it describes how ‘affective individuality,’ people’s agency and commitment, is essential for making social and political changes.<sup>6</sup> Lacy’s performances remain to a certain extent open-ended, as the roles of the audience and ‘actors/actresses’ are often interchangeable, and the partnerships and affiliations begun with the performances frequently continue afterward. Resembling public ceremonial rituals or pageants, their objective is primarily socially responsive and therapeutic; they are comprised of diverse activities not usually considered art, yet they are aesthetically and visually impressive.

In particular Lacy’s performances from the 1980’s were exquisitely designed and choreographed staged live displays. Like tableaux-vivants, which were especially popular in the Victorian period, they can be seen as models of disciplined and ordered self-display, although instead of portraying heroic historical or mythological scenes these were socio-political critiques. Corresponding to 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘attitudes,’ social parlor games and domestic entertainment, as well as amateur theater, civic theater and pageants, these activities are performative practices for conceptual themes, and at the same time present opportunities for socialization. Jennifer Fisher has remarked that tableaux-vivants “evidence an ethical practice or aesthetics of the self in the Foucauldian sense,” and that they can be “important sites of both individual and collective social transformation.”<sup>7</sup>

While creating a public site for dialogue and community building, people were the priority for Lacy, however she conceived and realized her projects visually. Highly

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline Alexandra Stevens. Making art matter: narrating the collaborative creative process. PhD. Dept. of Special Individualized Programme, Concordia University, 2001. iii, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Fisher. “Interperformance. The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramovic.” Art Journal v.56 (Win ’97): 28.

visual and interactive was Lacy's **The Whisper, the Wind and the Waves** (Fig. 8),<sup>8</sup> a graceful tableau-like performance of elderly women dressed in white. The 150 women, from a wide cross-section of cultural, racial, and class backgrounds, walked in a procession to a beach cove where, seated at tables in groups of four, they talked with one another about their concerns regarding aging, ageism, alienation and loneliness. The audience of 1000, watching from the surrounding cliffs, could listen to the women's voices transmitted by loudspeaker, and meet them after the show, thereby bridging the gap between aesthetic and ethical social processes. **The Crystal Quilt** (Fig. 9) was a 1987 performance of a "living quilt" of 400 older women in the *Crystal Court* of a commercial building in downtown Minneapolis. It was designed as an arrangement of tables of four, where the women were seated to talk about their experience. Meticulously choreographed, the pattern was transformed periodically when the women folded and unfolded the colored table covers, the changing colors and body positions animating the 'living picture.' The content of the women's conversations –private concerns about aging made public- was amplified by loudspeaker for an attending audience of 3000 on the balconies. Different from tableaux-vivants, which are usually mute, these performances included conversation, combining the visual and the auditory, cerebral and corporeal experience.

In a similar albeit smaller and more intimate format Belmore's *Mavu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for any Purpose*, was an evocative interactive tableaux-vivant set up in a gallery space. With a circle of empty chairs and their recorded voices representative of eight women from an Aboriginal community, it allowed visitors to

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<sup>8</sup>The performance took place at La Jolla Beach, San Diego, California in 1984.

connect to others' experience and concern. Whereas a tableau-vivant usually features actors and actresses as part of the display, the lack of the women themselves in this installation made a strong statement about the presence (or rather the absence) of (Aboriginal) women in public space. Belmore has given an explanation for what she perceives to be her role as an artist; she said in her artist statement: "Creating in the presence of the absent makes me a witness."<sup>9</sup>

As part of the West-Coast activist liberation and consciousness-raising project Lacy was one of the first second wave feminist artists to address incidences of violence through art making.<sup>10</sup> Working with visual imagery in relation to women's bodies, she articulated feminist theories of identity and representation, and the body as site of experience and primary space for art. Often autobiographical, feminist performance and body art in the early seventies made women's private experience public by enacting the (female) body, and it made visible the changing perception of the body from object to subject. In a society that privileges a cerebral and logical over an emotional and intuitive way of relating, the body is often repressed as lesser function, reinstating the physical body served as a point of departure for locating social and political agency for women. Reclaiming the body for many feminist artists meant reconnecting contemporary experience to that of a historical and mythological past, where matriarchal societies, perceived as egalitarian and holistic, presented a different model of relating. Spiritual and

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<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Belmore. Artist statement. Press Release. Ottawa, June 17, 2004. In: Canada Council website <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/news/releases/2004/sk127319685800468750.htm>. Media contact: Canada Council for the Arts, Public Affairs, Research and Communications, Carole Breton 1-800-263-5588, ext. 4523 or (613) 566-4414, ext. 4523, Donna Balkan 1-800-263-5588, ext.4134 or (613) 566-4305, Foreign Affairs Canada and International Trade Canada, Media Relations Office (613) 995-1874, Web site: [www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca).

<sup>10</sup> In the early seventies Lacy was involved with a number of Feminist projects at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. With Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro she founded The Feminist Studio Workshop in 1972 offering Feminist educational programs of art, history, and consciousness-raising.

ritualistic performance functions by anchoring experience in a culturally constructed body. Moira Roth has explained that

The term ritual is usually employed to describe a codified set of actions and behaviors that relate in some way to a culturally shared system of beliefs and myths.<sup>11</sup>

With reference to women's liberation of the body Lacy's *Ablutions* (1972), by addressing women's experience of violence and in particular rape, presented a violated and politically activated feminist subject.<sup>12</sup> Like a blood ritual it included an intense re-enactment of rape, as well as 'actresses' who metaphorically nailed raw beef kidneys and other animal innards to the walls, and bathed nude in washtubs filled with large amounts of cows' blood. Lacy described her orientation at that time as "very visceral."<sup>13</sup> Rape is one of the most 'intimate' of violations, an inherently private experience made public by force, and dealing with the abuse through art becomes effective at the site of the body activated in public space. Lacy's art combined her broad interests in psychology, medicine, and social design with political and social activism, by situating investigations into the body/mind connection in a political context. Jeff Kelley explained that for Lacy the interior of the body and the exterior spaces of community, society and politics were the same, that 'body politics' take place at the juncture of the self and others, of the individual and society.<sup>14</sup> Linking the two levels of experience has informed Lacy's

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<sup>11</sup> Moira Roth. Ed. The Amazing Decade. Woman and Performance Art in America 1970-1980. Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983. 22. Roth lists the artists investigating spiritual performance among others as Carolee Schneeman, Pauline Oliveros, Meredith Monk, Linda Montano, Mary Beth Edelson, Donna Henes, Betsy Damon, Ana Mendieta.

<sup>12</sup> Performed by Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel, and Avivah Ramani, it was initiated by Judy Chicago's Performance Workshop in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Newton. "She who would Fly". An Interview with Suzanne Lacy. High Performance Magazine, Spring 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Kelley. "The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy." In Nina Felshin. Ed. But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 224, 225.

intention to produce “sophisticated forms for meaningful social actions through art.”<sup>15</sup> Amelia Jones considered Lacy’s art as “paradigmatic for the intersecting of feminist art and performance art.” She explained that it integrated not only her own body but “calls upon the collective social bodies relevant to each piece.” She understood “activist performance of the ‘authentic body’ [...] as a dramatic re-embodiment of the hollowed-out contemporary subject in the service of social ideals.”<sup>16</sup> The authentic body –the embodied agency of women as subjects- is linked to creating identity and the self within the collective. Jones points out, that according to Henri Lefebvre, “the body is the means by which we produce ourselves as social beings, by which we produce ‘social space.’”<sup>17</sup> The body in this sense “functions as a kind of ‘resistance to power’ in relation to the body itself through its performance as socially determined and determining.”<sup>18</sup>

Belmore’s *For Dudley* was an especially poignant portrayal of the corporeal resistance to power, a dramatic physical and emotional rendition of violent death. With her ‘authentic body’ -and by extension the ‘body’ of a tree sapling- representative of another’s violated body, her activist performance affirmed resistance to political power structures.<sup>19</sup> By exposing the implications of a current socio-political event, she reenacted violation enacted against Native communities and the environment. Not all violations are as obvious and as easy to recognize, or portrayed as graphically; in particular the violence perpetrated against women, as Belmore has shown in *The Named and the Unnamed*, is

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<sup>15</sup> Suzanne Lacy quoted by Linda Macaluso in an unpublished pamphlet. Linda Macaluso. Ed. *Three Weeks in May: A political Performance by Suzanne Lacy. May 7 – May 24, 1977, Los Angeles, California.* 6. In Amelia Jones. *The Artist’s Body.* Survey. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Amelia Jones. *The Artist’s Body.* Survey. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Jones paraphrases Henri Lefebvre. Amelia Jones. *The Artist’s Body.* Survey. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 22.

<sup>19</sup> *For Dudley* was Belmore’s performance at the *7A\*11D Performance Art Festival* in Toronto in 1997.

often suppressed, kept secret, covered up, and overlaid with multiple meanings and interpretations. Although I do not consider Belmore a feminist artist per se, her work nevertheless reflects feminist concerns of oppression and difference, and it employs feminist strategies of questioning the status quo, eliciting dialogue and opportunities for participation.

It is by performing the body, and through the production of the social body that oppressive power structures can be exposed. The genealogy of Michel Foucault's power relations has underlined the consequences of increasingly tightened surveillance and discipline in view of the body. Power relations—where asserting power creates resistance—are inevitably complex, but by allowing them to be, in Foucault's words, "mobile, reversible, and unstable," power remains creative.<sup>20</sup> With education and practice - Foucault's power/ knowledge- it becomes possible to expose oppressive power structures, and develop collective strategies for shared social and political power. Foucault suggested replacing the utopian term of 'liberation,' with 'practices of freedom,' emphasizing a process-oriented and active model of communication and collaboration.<sup>21</sup>

### **Participants**

To 'practice freedom' Lacy created realistic embodiments of activist art that mediate private and public bodies. By liberating the 'docile body' and disciplined controlled social space, the quest of the feminist 'sexual revolution' becomes effective at intra-personal and inter-personal levels, where relationships are formed by personal awareness

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault. "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom." In Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth. New York: New Press, 1994. 292.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 283.

and communal significance, and function by cooperation rather than competition. Collaborating with people across all levels of a community, Lacy's approach challenged societal power structures of 'inside-and-outside' politics. Jeff Kelley has remarked that feminist art emerged in response to a social movement (woman's liberation) and not from within the arts. Feminist social theory therefore informed its distinctive strategies of "collaboration, dialogue, a constant questioning of aesthetic and social assumptions, and a new respect for audience."<sup>22</sup>

With the feminist tenet 'the personal is political' articulating individual and societal change, art in a social context is inclusive rather than elitist and exclusive, and in particular addresses issues of marginalization and discrimination. Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard believed that art has to be participatory and work "within differences as they change and evolve." She was suspicious of the notion of 'diversity,' which in her view neutralizes difference, and suggested replacing it "with key words like exchange and empathy."<sup>23</sup> In 1995 she proposed that power relations could be altered by "looking around" and changing perceptions, by recognizing art as inherent in real life personal experiences and social processes.<sup>24</sup>

'Participation performances' were part of Allan Kaprow's idea of art as experiential, holistic and meaningful form of everyday life.<sup>25</sup> His theories revealed the shifts in the perception of art as a private manifestation of the artist-as-genius, to

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<sup>22</sup> Lucy Lippard quoted by Jeff Kelley. Kelley, Jeff. "The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy." In Nina Felshin. Ed. But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 223, 224.

<sup>23</sup> Lucy Lippard. "Looking Around: Where we are and Where We Could Be" In Lacy, Suzanne. Ed. Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995:127, 128.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 126.

<sup>25</sup> Suzanne Lacy's teacher at Cal Arts, Kaprow influenced early Ritual Feminist Performance artists like Carolee Schneemann and Laurie Anderson.

‘theatrical’ art that included the viewer’s subjective interpretation as inherent to the work. This is linked to the dematerialization of the art object and conceptual art, as well as developments in sculpture and the performing arts. Where the Modernist concept of unity and purity placed sculptures -as precious, privileged, and ‘uncontaminated’ objects on a pedestal, post-modern reversal preferred hybrid floor-level installations. The evolution of the live performing arts, theater, vaudeville, and shows, can be traced through Passion Plays, pageants, spectacles and rituals to Italian Futurist, Russian Constructivist, and German Bauhaus investigations of demarcating and transgressing social space. Rooted in Conceptual and Body Art, Performance as ‘living sculpture’ evolved as an interdisciplinary experimental approach, combining various art media: music, dance, visual- and literary arts.<sup>26</sup>

Amelia Jones explains that in Modernist art the body was objectified and veiled, to confirm the meanings and values inherent in patriarchal structures based on Cartesian thought, which privileges the mind ‘over’ the body. With the increasingly liberating radicalizing trends in art in the 1960’s, the newly emerging body, now visible and active, enacted these dramatic social and cultural shifts. It became, writes Jones, “the locus of the self and the site where the public domain meets the private, where the social is negotiated, produced and made sense of.”<sup>27</sup>

Kaprow’s experimental art forms challenged permanence and control, and the boundaries of carefully segregated artistic and societal categories. Techniques of

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<sup>26</sup> RoseLee Goldberg. Performance. Live Art 1909 to the Present. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1979. Goldberg traces the developments in live performance. In North America, beginning in the early thirties, John Cage and Merce Cunningham at the *Black Mountain College* in North Carolina explored experimental music and dance. In the mid-fifties the *New School of Social Research* in New York became the center for experimental art, with Allan Kaprow and Robert Rauschenberg among others.

<sup>27</sup> Amelia Jones. The Artist’s Body. Survey. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000. 21.

immediacy, chance, and non-intentional actions informed eclectic combinations of arranging physical space with Environments and Assemblages, and corporeal space with Happenings.<sup>28</sup> Installations, like the theater stage, set up spatial and temporal situations and scenes, and particular experiences that engage the audience. In contrast to traditional sculptures, they aimed to present not a passive aesthetic viewing experience, but an active involvement in the conceptual process. As in Dada, Surrealist, and Fluxus performances, the participants act and react spontaneously without a fixed script or planned outcome, and creativity and action arise from a here-and-now perception of the moment. Comparable to counterculture interventions like ‘Sit-ins’ or ‘Be-ins’ at the time, Happenings – by erasing the division between performer and viewer- opened a space for encounter, and recreated the self vis-à-vis the collective by situating everyday activities into a ritualistic context. Similar to a psychoanalytical Gestalt Therapy model these techniques facilitated spontaneous experiential awareness of one’s self within social space. Like Kaprow, Lacy believed that meaningful experience is the most effective way to change consciousness, and her interactive projects invited people to become participants. With sculptures moved from their pedestals and the stage in the performing arts curtain-less and flattened, artists and viewers, performers and audiences began to investigate more interactive and involved ways to come together on common ground.

While ‘mapping the terrain’ of the work of contemporary artists engaged in participatory art forms, Lacy, has defined these ventures as innovative models for

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<sup>28</sup> Allan Kaprow. “From Assemblages, Environments and Happenings.” In Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. Ed. *Art in Theory. 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992. 703-709.

demarcating social space.<sup>29</sup> An eclectic range of artistic expressions informed by feminist and community concerns, they are- presented mostly outside of the traditional boundaries of media- based on engagement. She explained that these artists

(By) attacking boundaries [...], draw on ideas from vanguard forms, but they add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art, as we know it today.

Lacy observed that, based on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention, these investigations developed from the discourses of marginalized artists.<sup>30</sup>

It is particularly within this context that Belmore's art making practices position her as an activist artist. Belmore's approach, as outlined in the introduction, proceeds from an investigation of identity; as a Native of the Anishinabe Nation whose genealogy situates her in a marginalized societal place. By actualizing identity with ritual processes anchored in the body she maintains a central position of agency, and with an activist political commitment to socially relevant art activated in public space, she proposes to bring the margins into the center. Working with predominantly installation and performance media her pieces resemble political and social activism but are distinguished by their aesthetic sensibility. Like many of the 'new genre' art works, those created by Belmore have addressed concerns regarding ethnicity and race, women's rights and sexuality, as well as health and the environment; they can be interpreted as -following Lacy's phrase- "aesthetic expressions of activated value systems."<sup>31</sup> For Belmore, as

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<sup>29</sup> *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, the title of Lacy's 1995 anthology, was also the title of a symposium sponsored by the California College of Arts And Crafts in 1991. Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid: 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 30.

much as for the other activist artists, the commitment to social change is paramount.

Jo Hanson, one of the participants at the 1991 symposium *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, has challenged:

Much of what has been called public art might better be defined as private indulgence. Inherently public art is social intervention.<sup>32</sup>

Hanson was motivated by investigating the intersecting aspects of private and public as they affect people in public space, in particular in view of environmental and community concerns. Since the early seventies, she has been involved in performing mundane and repetitive everyday-life activities in reference to woman's work and the degradation and pollution of urban space. She regularly swept the sidewalk in front of her home and subsequently created sculptural installations from the collected litter, which she exhibited in various public spaces, including sidewalks, schools, churches, and City Hall. By transforming found trash into art works, she produced an artistic commentary on the state of her neighborhood, and initiated public debate. Both a performance and a political action, her art was intended to sensitize the public to social and economical problems through exhibitions, grassroots community organizing, and media campaigns.

*Public Disclosure: Secrets from the Street* (1980) was an exhibition at San Francisco City Hall of the refuse she had collected for a period of ten years. Displayed dated and marked as archeological finds, the discarded and unwanted became a public artwork, and an occasion for an anti-litter campaign. In tandem with an exhibition at the *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* that brought together the work of several video artists and their perceptions of the urban garbage problem, Hanson organized media events and community clean-up days. In collaboration with artists, industry, and civic

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid: 19.

organizations Hanson also developed an artist-in-residence program at the *San Francisco Waste Collection Agency*.<sup>33</sup>

Mierle Laderman Ukeles in New York City pursued similar interests. Her performances investigated the impact of repetitive mundane ‘maintenance’ activities, traditionally most often performed by women. By asserting their necessity, importance and value, she defined women’s social role as ‘unification...the perpetuation and maintenance of the species, survival systems, equilibrium.’<sup>34</sup> Connecting the private to the public, Ukeles has been working as the self-appointed (and unsalaried) artist-in-residence at the New York City Sanitation Department since 1978. Her first and most poignant work there, *Touch Sanitation* (1978-79), created dialog, and kinesthetic and emotional communication with people habitually rejected and marginalized for working in a ‘dirty’ profession. During a yearlong ritual performance, she personally shook -one by one- the hands of all (8500) garbage collectors in New York City and thanked them for “keeping New York City alive.”<sup>35</sup> A simple humane gesture of appreciation, it traversed separate spheres of public and private, and established connections between divided societal groups and confirmed community. Artistic expressions like these spring from a compassionate and empathetic response embedded in a relational and participatory model of art making. Lacy writes that “empathy begins with the self reaching out to another self, and an underlying dynamic of feeling that becomes the source of activism.”<sup>36</sup> Kaprow elaborated this process:

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<sup>33</sup> Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 230, 231.

<sup>34</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles: “The Garbage Girls”, 1991. Quoted in Amelia Jones. The Artist’s Body. Survey. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000. 89

<sup>35</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles quoted in Suzi Gablik. “Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism.” In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 82.

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 36.

I think this sense of what it means to be a social persona and the fact that every social person has a private person inside is vital to the sense of community and to any meaningful sense of 'public' – of public service. The way to get to those issues sometimes is organizational and structural, but often it has to do with compassion, with play, with touching the inner self in every individual who recognizes that the next individual has a similar self. And it is that community, whether literal or metaphorical, that is in fact the real public that we as artists might address.<sup>37</sup>

This empathic ethical stance, which is equally public and political as it is personal and spiritual, is invested in finding ways to expose and heal the perceived problems and injustices affecting people as well as the environment they live in. Dominique Mazeaud, aware of the dualism of a separate self, made art in a spirit of empathy, conscience, and service. *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande* (1989-96), a monthly performance of gathering litter from the Rio Grande River in Santa Fe, New Mexico and recycling the findings as sculptural installations, continued for seven years. Inspired by the ideas of Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and Allan Kaprow she performed daily-life activities as meaningful public ritual. She considered this action as ritual/metaphoric pilgrimage, with the intent to create awareness and solutions for ecological problems, and at the same time contextualize it as a sacred ritualistic act of healing.<sup>38</sup> Suzi Gablik has said, that a spiritual redemptive act like Mazeaud's questions and transcends oppressive and coercive patterns of power "operating in our cognitive and institutional structures."<sup>39</sup> Mazeaud worked as artist and as peace activist; her recent project *The Most Precious Jewel*, ongoing since 1998, is a monthly participatory ritual performance at the Plaza of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Seated in a public urban space, and wearing a mask to signify

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<sup>37</sup> Allan Kaprow's comment at the *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* symposium at the California College of Arts And Crafts in 1991. Cited in Suzanne Lacy. Ed. *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Dominique Mazeaud, artist statement. [http://wead.dreamfish-creative.com/mazeaud/dominique\\_mazeaud](http://wead.dreamfish-creative.com/mazeaud/dominique_mazeaud).

<sup>39</sup> Suzi Gablik. *The Reenchantment of Art*. New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1991. 122.

impersonal anonymity and a selfless act of service, she proceeds to cover a fabric globe with beadwork, inviting her transitory audience to participate in the beading ritual. After completion Mazeaud is planning a pilgrimage with the intent to heal and care for 'Mother Earth' as for an elderly frail parent by carrying the globe in a cradleboard on her back.<sup>40</sup> Motivated by an ethical and spiritual concern for the environment and in turn for people's place in the environment, she described herself as a 'heartist;' she wants to make "art for the earth" and "find the spiritual in art in our time."<sup>41</sup>

Suzi Gablik also believes that a change of heart -a corporeal and emotional reaction- is required to break the cultural trance that has prevented art from being accepted and effective in addressing social issues and concerns.<sup>42</sup> "World healing," she emphasized, "begins with the individual who welcomes the Other."<sup>43</sup> She wrote:

Inviting in the other makes art more socially responsive. It is not activism in the sense of the old paradigm, but an emphatic means of seeing through another's eyes, of stretching our boundaries beyond the ego-self to create a wider view of the world.<sup>44</sup>

Gablik's term of 'connective aesthetics' defined the ability to see that

Human nature is deeply imbedded in the world. It makes art into a model for connectedness and healing by opening up being to its full dimensionality-not just the disembodied eye.<sup>45</sup>

Feminist theories of representation and critiques of vision have questioned an external authoritarian point of reference where the male appropriative gaze has the power

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.weadartists.org/mazeaud/detail.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Dominique Mazeaud, artist statement. [http://wead.dreamfish-creative.com/mazeaud/dominique\\_mazeaud](http://wead.dreamfish-creative.com/mazeaud/dominique_mazeaud).

<sup>42</sup> Suzi Gablik. "Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism." In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 77.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 86.

<sup>44</sup> Suzi Gablik. "Commentary. Connective Aesthetics. American Art 6, 2 (1992): 6.

<sup>45</sup> Suzi Gablik. "Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism." In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 86.

over the objectified and passive female spectacle. De-constructing the subject/object dichotomy requires a strategic reversal of meaning, an intervention to show how meaning is undecidable within binary logic, as it addresses both sides of a paradox. Michael Ann Holly reveals this reciprocal process when remarking, “the gaze is in the first place a political issue. The person who does the looking is the person with the power. [...] looking is power, but so too is the ability to make someone look.”<sup>46</sup>

It is by grounding the action in the body, by performing the social body and constructing it as a ‘social sculpture’ that oppressive and authoritarian power relations can be exposed, reversed and ultimately (to a certain extent) resolved. Negotiation on physical and psychological levels is indispensable to assure that meaning and identity remain mutable and active in public space. The active body becomes the stage where inner reality intersects with the public, where the divisions between public and private can be played out. Socially responsive art is concerned with exposing and healing splits and violations in social and personal contexts; by performing the violated body its privacy is made public. Addressing a cross section of human-interest issues activist art has a public and political agenda and it works with psychosocial processes. By emphasizing active involvement in the social production of space, where the boundaries of public and private are negotiable, it functions as a forum for communication in the public interest.

Alternative approaches to public art, in the view of Virginia Maksymowicz, offer a more direct way for artists to communicate with their viewers. She has asked if there is any difference between private and public art at all, and puts the onus on the audience, as

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Ann Holly. Past Looking. Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996. 90.

the decisive factor in how art will be received and comprehended, how it will respond to community concerns and interests.<sup>47</sup> Jeff Kelley has explained that what makes art public is not only its increased visibility and accessibility -that its site is now the street and not the gallery- but its availability for people's participation in socio-aesthetic processes.<sup>48</sup>

In the course of its 'democratization' art was linked to everyday life by opening the gallery space as the site of daily activity. The active involvement with the community increased visibility and impact of the (private) artwork by placing it in public space, and relating it to a specific site. The concept of site-specificity highlights the shifting ideas in the field of public art. It reflects the changes in perception and distribution of power, and it is particularly relevant in view of public and private dimensions of social space. Site-specificity emerged from minimalist ideas like non-hierarchical serial repetition, the abandonment of compositional centrality, and grid like structures. Based on concepts of disruption and displacement, 'site-specific' describes a spatial investigation into the correlation between the artwork and the place where it is exhibited. Paralleling ideas of process, site, and temporality were investigated by artists working in Land or Earth Art.<sup>49</sup> Site or place, in their view, were not only the physical location, but also, as Brian Wallis has written: "the artistic interventions that marked, traversed, constructed, and demarcated territory."<sup>50</sup> His term 'spatial practices' describes the dialectical conceptual

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<sup>47</sup> Virginia Maksymovicz. "Alternative Approaches to Public Art." In Mitchell, W. J. T. Ed. Art and the Public Sphere. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.147.

<sup>48</sup> Jeff Kelley. "The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy." In Nina Felshin. Ed. But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 232.

<sup>49</sup> Not a cohesive movement, what these artists had in common was the notion to create new forms and vistas in the landscape, and change the impressions of the environment. They attempted to reshape and restructure the ground, or the vegetation, and imported and manipulated unusual objects into the landscape. Some of the art was performance-based, and articulated the impact of time and natural forces on objects and the human body. A different approach to sculpture that grew out of Minimalism; it combined with radical and unique conceptual strategies in art making.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Wallis. "Survey." In Land and Environmental Art. Jeffrey Kastner. Ed. London: Phaidon Press, 1998. 27

relation of viewer and object, as well as the social processes that are integral for creating the piece.<sup>51</sup>

Politically correct attacks on the 'institution' at the time were echoed in the art-world with increasing ambivalence towards its own traditional institutions, in particular the canon of Modernism, and the personalized cult of post-war American Abstract Expressionism. Artists challenged conventional boundaries between media, carefully guarded by modernists; sculptural space understood as void or emptiness by Modernist sculptors, was now investigated as a dynamic, dialectic relationship between object and viewer. These experimental explorations in art were dismissed by Modernist art critic Michael Fried as 'theatrical.' He critiqued 'Literalist (his term for Minimalist) Art' for its loss of 'objecthood' and formal boundaries between categories in art.<sup>52</sup> Like other Modernists he subscribed to the conventional aesthetic categories of high art Modernism, following Clement Greenberg's theories which asserted a formalist view of sculpture, based on rigid critical rules where characteristics other than intrinsic formal elements were to be avoided as detrimental impurities.

Rosalind Krauss observed "sculpture had entered a categorical no-man's-land" of undefined boundaries between historical terms like sculpture, monument and architecture. With her seminal article "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" she attempted to map and explain the ruptures of eclectic terms, and position them as a historicized development in art. By acknowledging the logic of the negative—the opposite binary—of a category she moves away from the modernist preoccupation with fixed categories and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid: 27.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Fried. "Art and Objecthood." This article was originally published in *Artforum* in 1967. In Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory. 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992. 822.

distinctions and shifts into postmodernist thinking.<sup>53</sup>

Dissatisfaction with political and social systems was reflected in the refusal to produce 'commodities' which would perpetuate those systems, and artists particularly questioned the accessibility and institutionalized control of the art market, the museum and gallery space, the *white cube*. The site, in view of the social construction of space, marks a geographical or architectural location, as well as a network of social relations, a community, and the discourses of its social, political, and economic contexts.

Miwon Kwon has observed how an expanded idiom of site-specific has become congruent with alternative terms like text-specific, debate-specific, audience-specific, community-specific, or project-specific, indicative of the struggle to define the art-site relationship within more recent art practices.<sup>54</sup> Site has been defined, she wrote, as "different cultural debates, a theoretical concept, a social issue, a political problem, an institutional framework [...], a neighborhood or seasonal event, a historical condition, [...]."<sup>55</sup> Site has, Kwon continues, become a catchall term for practices and projects

As various as a billboard, an artistic genre, a disenfranchised community, an institutional framework, a magazine page, a social cause, or a political debate. It can be literal like a street corner or virtual like a theoretical concept.<sup>56</sup>

She interprets this mainstreaming trend as "yet another instance of how vanguardist, socially conscious, and politically committed art practices always become domesticated by their assimilation into the dominant culture."<sup>57</sup> Therefore Kwon would like to "reframe site-specificity as the cultural mediation of broader social, economic and

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<sup>53</sup> Rosalind Krauss. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* no. 8 (Spring 1979): 36.

<sup>54</sup> Miwon Kwon. *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid: 30.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid: 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid: 1.

political processes [...].”<sup>58</sup> She finds that the definition of the site as ‘community-specific’ makes sited art problematic, as it highlights the ambiguity and discursive slippage of terms like community, audience, site and public.<sup>59</sup> She raises questions about what defines community, and the possible extent of collaboration and consensus that creates its collective identity. She is especially suspicious of the notion of unity attempted by artists who appear to include the community but rather exclude and exploit its members by directing them from the outside.<sup>60</sup> What determines the value, the success, and effectiveness of the artwork for all participants is closely related to critiques of reducing art to a kind of inadequate and ineffectual social work.<sup>61</sup> Grant Kester questioned the altruistic motivation of artists (and equally curators or the institutions that fund and promote art) working in community projects and derided their orientation as “aesthetic evangelism”, indicative of a

Reformist ideology that [...] envisions personal inner transformation and growth as the key to the amelioration of social problems such as poverty, crime, homelessness, unemployment and violence.<sup>62</sup>

Kester’s viewpoint however appears to maintain a perception of disadvantaged communities as passive and helpless victims of socio-economic conditions to be acted upon, rather than as participants in political debate. Arlene Raven believed that a ‘desire for community’ motivates art making,

Which attempts to draw together a community and to participate with its audience

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid: 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid: 94.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid: 117.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid: 103. Kwon lists a number of writers taking this position in their various articles written about the *Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago* exhibition in 1993, curated by Mary Jane Jacob.

<sup>62</sup> Grant Kester. “Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art.” *Afterimage* (January 1995) 5-11. Quoted by Miwon Kwon. *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002. 142.

in the definition and expression of the whole physical and social body in both its unity and diversity.<sup>63</sup>

This is not only a feminist concern, for Raven asserted that an ‘authentic community,’ the expression of a purposeful and self-conscious as well as self-critical commitment to the common good, a “community that can embody authentic democracy,” is not pre-existing but has to be constructed by its members.<sup>64</sup> One of the building blocks can be public art, which as Lacy has elucidated, is “what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself become the art work.”<sup>65</sup> With this participatory and inclusive approach to art making, Lacy and other artists working in the context of socially engaged public art -and Belmore can most definitely be included in this list- have proposed an image of people engaged in mutual and egalitarian communication and community that is very different from the traditional one of the ‘hero on a horse.’

## **Publics**

Contemporary public art is no longer the ‘hero on the horse’, as Raven’s well-worn phrase has suggested, and neither is it only publicly funded abstract sculptures situated outdoors. Often controversial, art visible in public places has come to include a diverse array of artistic expressions, ranging from sculptural and refined to performance-oriented and ‘in-the-face.’ ‘Art in the public interest’ for Raven implies an activist and

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<sup>63</sup> Arlene Raven. “Word of Honor.” In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 162.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid: 165.

<sup>65</sup> Suzanne Lacy. “Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys.” In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 20

communitarian agenda concerned with social justice and community coalition-building.<sup>66</sup> The artists' role as social agent "aspires to reveal the plight and plead the case of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged, and to embody what they view as humanitarian values."<sup>67</sup> The term public art, traditionally understood as commissioned sculptures placed in public places, now describes a wide variety of artistic expressions made more visible and accessible by positioning them in public space. It includes an eclectic range of articulations of socially conscious art, addressing societal concerns, current issues and public policies. Public art in the social context is concerned with the way art is perceived and affects the individual within a political public environment, and with the intention to transform people's views and lives, render it physically and psychologically accessible. The question of how to reach the public with socio-cultural or political relevant strategies of art making, has been inserted into a postmodernist discourse where art is neither the product of a solitary genius, nor is it limited to its official designated locations like museums and galleries.

The traditional models of public art, once primarily defined as equestrian statues, were sculptural self-portraits commissioned by the ruler. Erected on an elevated and commanding vantage point of a horse on top of a pedestal, it symbolized the authoritative power of the state. Placed in strategic and conspicuous locations, where a submissive public could admire them, these visual manifestations of propaganda were a linear one-way message of the sovereign to his subjects. The bronze memorial, what Judith Baca has described as the 'cannon in the park' type of public art, while glorifying the mighty,

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<sup>66</sup> Arlene Raven. "Introduction." In Arlene Raven. Ed. Art in the Public Interest. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid: 4.

excluded large segments of the population.<sup>68</sup>

The recipient public is not a monolithic and unified mass, as past (and present) imperialist regimes have wanted it to be, but a diversified and unruly collection of dissonant voices that have learned to talk back and insist on being heard. Emphasizing dialogue and debate, the public is a project of working out difficult and conflict-ridden solutions by a cyclical and reciprocal process of negotiating positions. Rosalyn Deutsche suggested that conflict is an integral aspect of (political) life, and, rather than undermining public space, is a necessary ingredient for its existence. Social/public space where people assume political identities, she asserted, must not act as a closed unit that perceives conflict as disturbing, but rather as one that readily welcomes debate and includes opposing voices and images into an open concept of democracy.<sup>69</sup>

Deutsche departed from Claude Lefort's principle of the uncertainty of democracy where meaning and unity of a society is at once constituted and put at risk. Contrary to absolutist totalitarian regimes that assert control through an external referent of power, democratic processes should remain time-limited and impermanent, flexible and changeable. Lefort believed that in order to safeguard public space from appropriation by certain groups political power has to be anchored in a space left empty of incontestable meaning, allowing for ongoing negotiations and debate.<sup>70</sup> Similar to Lefort's "empty space" feminist philosopher Lorraine Code, speaking particularly for women's assertion in public life, proposed a "rhetorical space" as a temporary, ephemeral spatial location for

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<sup>68</sup> Judith Baca quoted by Suzanne Lacy. Suzanne Lacy. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the terrain: new genre public art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche. "Introduction." In Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1996. xxiv.

<sup>70</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche quoting Claude Lefort. Rosalyn Deutsche. "Agoraphobia." In Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1996. 275.

negotiation, a place that offers the possibility to be heard, understood, and taken seriously.<sup>71</sup>

The infamous and controversial *Tilted Arc* affair, the decade-long debate about the functions and effects of Richard Serra's large minimalist metal sculpture, highlights the contradictions in public space, as well as the changing concepts of public and site specific art. *Tilted Arc* was one of the large-scale abstract sculptures, which as Raven ironically recalled, "flooded the public domain in the U.S. during the 1980's, due to the *National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places* program."<sup>72</sup> The *Tilted Arc* affair ended with its removal, and -epitomizing the Lefort idea- left (for a number of years) an actual "empty space" in the Federal Plaza.<sup>73</sup> As the actual and symbolic site for negotiating the many conflicting and complex issues concerning public art, it exposed the polarized factions and the mutable boundaries on either side of the public/private divide. It illustrated that the parameters of public and private are impermanent and changeable, and contingent to a particular space and time. The point of view that the artist (Richard Serra) asserted private interests vis à vis a public that wanted to be heard, differs from the perception that he acted on behalf of a public, a certain group of artists and their common interests. The public is not unified and monolithic, but multilayered and diverse. Representing different layers of perceptions and opinions were the immediate public of the office workers frequenting the plaza, the wider public of artists and art critics, the public at large who was informed about the affair, and also the U.S. agency<sup>74</sup> which had

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<sup>71</sup> Lorraine Code. *Rhetorical Spaces. Essays on Gendered Locations*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995: x.

<sup>72</sup> Arlene Raven. "Introduction." In Arlene Raven. Ed. *Art in the Public Interest*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Jacob K. Javits Building on Foley Square in New York City.

<sup>74</sup> General Services Administration, Art in Architecture Program.

commissioned the art work for \$175 000.00 and later dismantled it.

The artist's argument was that removal of *Tilted Arc* -a site-specific work- to another location would obscure its message and with that destroy it. Intended to expose a dysfunctional public space, the sculpture was a commentary on the social divisions, exclusions and fragmentation of public spaces and their controlling function. Miwon Kwon explained site specificity, as "initially based in a phenomenological or experiential understanding of the site, defined primarily as an agglomeration of the actual physical attributes of a particular location."<sup>75</sup> In keeping with a site-related critical discourse Serra stated that he "wanted to actively bring people in the sculpture's context, " and that "after the piece is created the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture."<sup>76</sup>

The argument for removal originated from the ranks of the employees of the surrounding office buildings that interacted daily with the site, perhaps in response to the artist's confrontational and appropriative intention of objectifying the control of their environment. The public reaction revealed priorities and values different from those of the artist, but the public discourse was also divided along lines of the artists from the radical far left, the liberal, and the neo-conservative orientations.

Robert Storr entered the debate by asking questions about the accountability of the artists in terms of specific political obligations.<sup>77</sup> He was interested in the "way in which art actually enters the social world,"<sup>78</sup> and consequently the methods of

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<sup>75</sup> Miwon Kwon. *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Clara Weyergraf. *Richard Serra: Interviews Etc., 1970-1980*. Yonkers: Hudson River Museum, 1980: 168.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Storr. "Tilted Arc: Enemy of the people?" In Arlene Raven. *Art in the Public Interest*: 280.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 280.

communication that make this possible.<sup>79</sup> For Deutsche the terminology used for defining criteria for public art revealed the appropriation of public space. In her view, often-used expressions like “for the people, encouraging participation, serving constituencies, relinquishing elitism, and accessibility,” sound deceptively democratic, but in fact equate the public with private interests, private property and state control.<sup>80</sup> Virginia Maksymovich considered *Tilted Arc* “an absolute fiasco in terms of artist-community relationships,” and regretted that rather than “stimulating real dialogue, it resulted in an obstinate stand-off between artists and the non-art public.”<sup>81</sup> She considered it important for ‘political art’ to respond to community concerns and interests, that it would be meaningful and “intelligible to a non-art audience.”<sup>82</sup>

*Tilted Arc* was not the first controversial public art work to be contested extensively and has not remained the only one. It was exemplary as a performance piece in its effectiveness for generating public debate and negotiations on many levels, and for exposing the difference between an art public and an art audience, defined by their level of willingness and commitment to participate in debate. For W. J. T. Mitchell the possibility that public art can be a “site for critical performance” that “disrupts the image of a pacified, utopian public sphere, that exposes contradictions,” is based on the dialectic between utopian and critical functions of public art.<sup>83</sup> He would like to “force a basic choice in the way we think about art and the public sphere: either there is no such thing as

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid: 278.

<sup>80</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche. “From Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy”. In Judith Mastai. *Art in Public Places*. A Vancouver Casebook. Vancouver Art Gallery, 1993. 27, 33.

<sup>81</sup> Virginia Maksymovich. “Alternative Approaches to Public Art.” In W. J. T Mitchell. Ed. *Art and the Public Sphere*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.56.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid: 148.

<sup>83</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell. *Art and the Public Sphere*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. 3.

public art, or all art is public art.”<sup>84</sup>

The utopian idealized “bourgeois” public sphere, according to the theory of Jürgen Habermas, was the forum where political processes contribute to forming public opinion and dialogue, considered essential for assuring democratic processes, and acts as intermediary between the individual and the state. According to Habermas ‘communicative action’ is necessary for a society to develop greater understanding and communication among its members, to encourage communitarian goals rather than self-interests.<sup>85</sup> Like Mitchell, who recognizes the contradictions within the public sphere, Deutsche as well has doubts about the probability of a unified and homogenized public sphere based on classical and Enlightenment ideals of a political public, which can “reach consensus about the common good through the exercise of reason.” For Deutsche the unified public space was a patriarchal fiction that controls and excludes difference and otherness.<sup>86</sup> Homi Bhabbha has explained that

Masculinism as a position of social authority [...] is about the subsumption or sublation of social antagonism; it is about the repression of social division; [...] about the power to authorize an “impersonal” holistic or universal discourse on the representation of the social.<sup>87</sup>

The impartial observer, in an attempt to create an illusory sense of security, wants to escape from rather than enter public space, which Deutsche has associated with openness, contingency, incompleteness, and partiality.<sup>88</sup> In her view, a unified and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid: 4.

<sup>85</sup> Jürgen Habermas. “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964).” In *New German Critique*, Vol. 1, 3, 1974. 49.

<sup>86</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche. “Introduction.” In *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996. xxiii.

<sup>87</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche. “Agoraphobia.” In *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996. 312.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid: 308.

universalist conception of public only serves special interest groups that deny the voice of and evict certain social groups from public space. She wants to expose the evictions and omissions, the 'cover stories' that serve to cover up the fear and uncertainty associated with an ongoing process of negotiations with others.<sup>89</sup>

Feminist critiques of perception and representation of the 'other' have introduced the idea of multiple viewpoints that will disrupt fixed polarized subject/object dichotomies. Informed by a context of inclusive openness and concern, socially responsive public art aims to mediate sensory experience, and change people's emotional and spiritual relationship to their environment. It delimits the parameters of an active space for negotiating conflict, difference, and the social and psychological ramifications of violence as it affects the socially produced and excluded other. Public Art that addresses these concerns will be active, not by memorializing the past, but by its place in the present, the immediacy of everyday life. It intends to engage its audience -not by impartial aesthetic observation- but by creating sites for communicating a definite message open to discussion in public space.

How does Belmore fit into this context of socially responsive activist art? Her works –informed by a minimalist abstract aesthetic- address specific concerns. Motivated by making visible and giving voice to issues affecting First Nations communities, she nevertheless does not exclude the 'other' (non-native) peoples and acknowledges that "we are all connected." She addresses ecological issues but cannot be pigeonholed as environmentalist, she asserts women's oppression, yet cannot be considered exclusively as a feminist artist. Like other activist artists, she identifies with the oppressed victim,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid: 325.

takes on its persona, and becomes the violated other. By implicating the audience, the public, Belmore's work represents a site for concern where she negotiates questions of identity in terms of gender and ethnicity, for emphatic participation in public space.

Whiteness and its transgressions are underlying themes of **State of Grace** (Fig. 10), one of the installations of *The Named and the Unnamed*.<sup>1</sup> Whiteness as a marker of domination here is overlaid with ambiguous potential interpretations of gender and race, identities that are anchored in the human body. A wall-mounted 4'x5' black and white photograph presents a partial view of the body of a woman, placed in the center of an expanse of a disorderly white surface. Both, the paper -sliced into vertical ribbons as by a paper shredder- and the impending disruption of the time-limited composition -threatened by the air currents in the room- evoke a sense of uncertainty and violation. The photograph -rotated to the right- compels the viewer to tilt the head sideways and change the angle and perspective. Seen and interpreted from another point of view, the movement of the paper animates the composition, brings it to life. The promise of potentiality, and of non-definitive, multiple readings emphasize the transitory and transformative aspects of experience, where everything is in a state of flux - or in a state of grace.

With this chapter I want to establish Belmore's art making as an activist assertion of her concern for the violation of the socially and culturally constructed other, with the intent of transforming social meaning through ritual. 'Spacing bodies' is the term I have introduced to describe her process -anchored in the body- of enacting the transgressions

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<sup>1</sup> *The Named and the Unnamed* curated by Charlotte Townsend-Gault and Scott Watson at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC, October 4 - December 1. 2002; touring to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, May 7 - August 3. 2003, and The Confederation Centre, Charlottetown, PEI, October 5 - December 28. 2003.

and violations in a performative space for social drama. Her performance and installations included in *The Named and the Unnamed* exemplify the ways in which violence operates within social systems, affecting those that are excluded. With whiteness as signifier for identities of race and gender, spatial parameters of public and private are imbedded in a feminist discourse on the active lived body. It is especially through the acts of recognizing and 'naming the other' that the violated bodies of women (and men) are performed in an activated social space.

### **Whites**

The deceptive image of *A State of Grace*, a seemingly undisturbed 'sleeping beauty', while still visible, nevertheless creates doubt. The woman appears to be Aboriginal, her symbolic identity is conspicuous by physical markers of ethnicity, but like her beauty, these are subjectively determined. Also uncertain is her state - sleep or death - and her name; identifying her as 'Sleeping Beauty,' or 'Snow White' is subjective and culturally determined. Imbedded in European thought and mythology, both folk tale figures impersonate a gender-specific coming-of-age thematic, where the enchanted passive child/woman is rescued by the assertive male figure who restores community. A consequence of violation, sleep and death are ambiguous transitory states determined by a superior power working through human relationship. In as much as the reading of symbols and signs is determined by cultural norms and ethics, the symbolism of whiteness in Western myth is linked to concepts like virginity, innocence, purity, life, or unity, although in Chinese thought for example the color white represents death.

Belmore has addressed the concept of whiteness in view of gender and race with

**Nibiwe/behzig, many/one, \_/\_** (1999) (Fig. 3b)<sup>2</sup> where hundreds of small white plaster casts were lined up on a wall shelf. Replicas of nude Indian princess dolls with breasts and long stereotypical braids -of the toy or dollar store variety-, their rigid and pale bodies (and 'pale faces') hinted at the violation inherent in social structures of stereotyping and classifying that marginalize and exclude the 'other'. To represent and recognize the 'other' Belmore had supplied a set of mirrors, hung on two central columns in the gallery space, their position opposite one another set up to generate an endless tunnel of mirrored images. They were a reminder that without a conscious act of creating identity and relationship, without any emerging language to name the other, we remain forever locked into a perpetually repetitious mirror-phase. The doll forms underlined the polarized and paradoxical aspect of doubling by representing a somewhat endearing, but - by their rigid repetitiveness- also threatening and alienating image of 'white women.' Belmore had sent extra dolls for the exhibition at *Galerie Optica* in case of breakage during transport.<sup>3</sup> Not part of the official agenda of the show, this detail became one of the incidental extra-ordinary and spontaneous actions/messages Belmont generates by her open-ended way of working. Reading between the lines, this coincidental sign speaks of the expendability of the fragile self alienated within a society defined by anonymity, mass production and commodification.

Belmore used the white plaster dolls again in *Dreamers* (1999) an installation at the *Keyano Art Gallery*, where she had lined them up -leaning against the base of a white wall in the gallery- like a repetitive and uniform crowd. Marie Leduc described them as "drained of color, [...] distinguishable against the curving white walls only by their

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<sup>2</sup> *Nibiwe/behzig, many/one, \_/\_* was shown in 1999 at *Galerie Optica* in Montreal.

<sup>3</sup> Information from Colette Sparkes at *Optica*. Personal conversation. March 20, 2002.

shadows.” Leduc interpreted the dominance of “whiteness” as representative of the enforced conformity, typical of the methods of the capitalist system where the ends justify the means.<sup>4</sup> The ends in the choices to be made between the environment and the economy perpetuate the marginalization of Native communities. *Dreamers* included a series of photographic images alluding to the environmental impact of the Oil Sands strip-mine on Aboriginal lands in Fort McMurray, Alberta. The environmental impact on the Native community was disclosed by the same ‘Indian Princess’ doll, the original store-bought model that Belmore had included scorched, charred and blackened the color of oil. Opening into a psychoanalytical interpretation, the shadow brought home that destructive societal structures, which are violating people’s environmental, economical and psychological well being cannot be indefinitely ignored and suppressed, but have a way of affecting everyone.

**blood on the snow** (Fig. 11) again contemplated white as an inconclusive sign for death -or life. Belmore’s installation at *The Named and the Unnamed* was a room-wide spreading white duvet neatly sewn in a boxed pattern. Like a grid of whiteness, its smooth and tidy horizontality was only interrupted by the form of a chair in the center, covered in the same material. The empty chair, made conspicuous by the absence of the seated human figure symbolic of the ‘other,’ raised questions about identity, belonging, and the body. However enveloped and included, the chair stood out, especially by the red color staining its back rest, its virginal whiteness disturbed by traces of what could be the blood from a wound, or that of birth or menstruation. The fluffy material of the ‘comforter’ hinted at comfort, security, protection, and inclusion, to be padded from danger; in contrast the disturbing seeping red color suggested blood, wounding, violation,

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<sup>4</sup> Marie Leduc. “Rebecca Belmore. Pale Faces.” *Canadian Art* 16, 2 (Summer 1999): 78.

or death. However, feminist interpretations of birth and menstruation assert blood as life-giving, and by allusion a 'blanket of snow' contradicts the cozy warmth with its polar opposite of freezing to death.

With *The Indian Factory*, a performance at *High Tech Storytellers: An Interdisciplinary Arts Festival* at the AKA Gallery in Saskatoon in June 2000, Belmore also embodied 'death by whiteness.' Wearing white coveralls, she proceeded to immerse five men's shirts into buckets with a white plaster mix, and then hanging them on hooks on the wall to dry, she recreated death, the stiff and petrified replicas of five frozen human bodies. Belmore's performance was a response to the death of five Native men who froze to death at sub-zero temperatures, victims of a standard police practice in Saskatoon, of depositing drunken (Native) men out of town into the 'wilderness,' so they could –supposedly- walk off their intoxication.<sup>5</sup> In Part Two of the performance Belmore (and her partner Osvaldo Yero) created an 'action painting' by means of a feather attached to a string and blown about by the air currents of a fan. The feather -dipped in blood- left a pattern of blood spatters on the wall and floor of the gallery, and on the overalls worn by the artists. The mark of bloodshed and that of Native cultures combined to witness the violence perpetrated against Native peoples. Belmore clarified her intention for this performance work:

Through the process of performing I'm attempting to address the power systems under which our communities must struggle to survive. I would like to acknowledge those men who lost their lives and the ones who were strong enough to speak out.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Belmore performed *The Indian Factory* with partner Osvaldo Yero at *High Tech Storytellers: An Interdisciplinary Arts Festival* at the AKA Gallery in Saskatoon in June 2000. Lynn Hughes and Marie-Josée Lafortune. *Penser L'Indiscipline. Recherches Interdisciplinaires en art contemporain. Creative Con/Fusions. Interdisciplinary Practices in Contemporary Art.* Montreal: Optica, 2001.95-101

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Belmore's comment recorded by Lynn Hughes. Ibid: 96.

*blood on the snow* has linked present-day violation to another, more historical tragedy. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, the curator of *The Named and the Unnamed* suggested that the piece refers to *Wounded Knee*,<sup>7</sup> the 1890 death of 150 Sioux, most of them women and children. Slain by the U.S. army in less than an hour, their frozen distorted bodies were found only several days later covered by snow.<sup>8</sup> *Wounded Knee* has become a symbol for the wrongs inflicted on Native peoples by their colonizers, the clash of cultures, white versus red.

With whiteness as one of its signs, *The Named and the Unnamed* portrayed struggle, loss, and silence; it exposed and deplored the impact of violence on the colonized and marginalized, women's dilemmas and those of Native peoples. Whiteness here determined the ethnic and cultural embodiment of women, it lamented their tragedies. Inscribed in the presences and absences of the (female) figure, the aesthetic of the body marked the traces and insinuations of violence, activated by placing it in a performative space. Definitive activist statements, Belmore's minimalist and conceptual installations are nevertheless informed by a subtle aesthetic, and as Townsend-Gault concluded, "for her (Belmore) there is no sharp divide between aesthetics and ethics."<sup>9</sup>

### **Active Spaces**

Belmore's performances can be seen as ethical people-centered and site-specific activist

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<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault and James Luna. Rebecca Belmore. The Named and the Unnamed. Vancouver: The University of British-Columbia. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Information about this historical event is found on these websites:  
<http://msnbc.com/onair/msnbc/TimeandAgain/archive/wknee/1890.asp?cp1=1>,  
<http://www.lastoftheindependents.com/wounded.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault and James Luna. Rebecca Belmore. The Named and the Unnamed. Vancouver: The University of British-Columbia. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2002. 11.

strategies for creating dialogue, setting the stage for spontaneous intervention in the moment. Her performances, which she called 'actions,' do not have a script, but evolve from a basic concept, the idea of what she wants to 'talk' about. By working intuitively, the moment is open to interpretation and change, yet paradoxically remains anchored in the here-and-now, and by opening the space to include the audience in the creative process, the spectator becomes participant.

The spontaneous and open-ended articulation of ideas and emotions situate her work with Dada, or the Environments and Happenings à la Allan Kaprow. In a similar method members of *Fluxus* staged performance events of public reflexivity that deconstructed and restructured art with expressions of dynamic spontaneity and actuality. By mixing elements from all media, their approach dismantled the boundaries dividing art disciplines, and with that the notion of discipline itself. The innovative forms of articulation and corporeality anchor the performance in the body, and liberate the disciplined body from prescribed order and hierarchical limitations. In theater, Bertold Brecht's concept of the 'fourth wall' demarcated a dedicated psychological space for self-inquiry. Jerzy Grotowski, who understood theater as a way of staging socio-political commentary, investigated the correlations between theater and ritual. Performance for him was an initiation, a rite of passage, where the stage was removed and with that the distance between actor/artist and audience, where the spontaneous exploration and articulation of the present moment eliminated rehearsals, and allowed for an inclusive communal experience.

Victor Turner has described social behavior of public reflexivity as liminality, a state of 'being-on-a-threshold' between the personal and the social. Like ritual it

represented a space/time continuum of suspension, enchantment, and experimental potentiality. Ritual requires a framed space set off from the routine world, to allow for a challenging reversal of prescribed rules and laws. Turner detailed this dynamic process of transforming social meaning:

To frame is [...] to create by rules of exclusion and inclusion a bordered space and a privileged time within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be 'relived', scrutinized, assessed, revalued, and if need be remodeled and rearranged.<sup>10</sup>

For Charlotte Townsend-Gault the curator of *The Named and the Unnamed*, ritual was an "idea in transformation."<sup>11</sup>

### **Voices**

**Vigil** (Fig. 12a, b) was the title of a video recording of Belmore's performance on site in the Downtown Eastside district in Vancouver BC in the summer of 2002.<sup>12</sup> Running as a fifty-minute loop it was one of the installations at *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition. The footage had been overlaid with an irregular overall pattern of light bulbs; recording an actual event that took place at an inner city street corner, the narrative was made unreal by the layer of dotted lights that created an 'other' level of vision. The viewer was compelled to focus on either the one or the other plane on the screen, or constantly shift between both; watching on two levels placed the audience simultaneously inside and outside the action. It seemed easier to concentrate on one surface at a time, yet the transition increased the attention on either, and to see the whole picture both have to

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<sup>10</sup> Victor Witter Turner. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault. "Ritualizing Ritual's Rituals." *Art Journal* 51, 3 (Fall 1992): 52.

<sup>12</sup> The performance of *Vigil* was part of Belmore's residency at *BelkinSatellite*, a downtown location of the UBC gallery.

be seen as one.

The duality of the video made visible that most processes occur on (at least) two levels of experience, so that by doubling, and by “seeing in-between” perception and awareness are heightened. Homi Bhabha’s notion of “seeing in-between”, where the spectator turns intermediary and is implicated in a process of negotiation and exchange, described a “mediatory in-betweenness,” which marks “the human position.”<sup>13</sup> And it is through speech and action, through negotiation and “speaking in-between,” Bhabha asserts, that social processes and relations are formed and maintained.<sup>14</sup> For Hannah Arendt, who believed in the necessity of creativity and active participation in political discourse<sup>15</sup>, the in-between of speech and action, critical for the human condition, is the ‘interest’ that “lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together”<sup>16</sup>

Scott Watson, co-curator of *The Named and the Unnamed* at the *Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery* at the *University of British Columbia* in Vancouver B.C., saw the light bulbs as a barrier. By disrupting vision they will provoke a process of inquiry in the same way as, he said, “the memory of these women ought to trouble our conscience.” He perceived the light bulbs as symbolic of the candles lit during the performance.”<sup>17</sup> The candles Belmore lit during the street performance were her humane and empathetic gesture to acknowledge, to witness and to speak. They commemorated a number of women, who had disappeared from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside in the past 25 years.

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<sup>13</sup> Homi Bhabha. “Aura and Agora: On Negotiating Rapture and Speaking Between.” In Richard Francis. Ed. Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary art, 1996: 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 13

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 182.

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault and James Luna. Rebecca Belmore. The Named and the Unnamed. Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. The University of British Columbia, 2003. 8.

As an activist artist Belmore wanted to disrupt habitual vision, redirect the viewer's attention, and single out what could possibly remain one of so many news items that saturate the media and barely catch people's attention. Motivated by her interest in the lives of these women, she responded to a current event she had found particularly disturbing on many levels of experience. She wanted to make art to witness and make public the circumstances, and expose the underlying conditions for the violence that takes place often unacknowledged.

Activist Art is socially relevant, with the intention to unsettle and, to a certain extent, transform people's views and lives. Lucy Lippard believed that activist public art becomes meaningful and accessible through its potential to "care about, challenge, involve and consult the audience," in contrast to most commercial art that is "relatively generalized, (and) detachable from politics and pain." She has been interested in notions of local, locality, and place, understood in a wider sense of belonging and environment, as loci for encounters with the audience.<sup>18</sup>

The audience for many art genres will be to a degree predictable, whereas art in the street attracts a more accidental audience. Interventionist art, as Suzanne Lacy defined it, "is made outside of an expected place and time, (it is) art that does not make a predictable appearance." Spontaneous and created out of the moment, these interventions are meant to disrupt and with that create awareness, and they may have a definite socio-political message. The finished art object in this view is less important than its impact, and how it raises issues through its ambiguity.<sup>19</sup> The element of surprise and dislocation,

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<sup>18</sup> Lucy Lippard "Looking Around: Where we are and Where we Could Be" In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995:114.

<sup>19</sup> Suzanne Lacy. "Seeing Mud Houses. In Kim Pruesse. Ed. Accidental Audience: Urban Interventions by Artists. Canada: Ontario Arts Council, 1999. 70.

the visual and conceptual disruption accentuates the message and makes it speak more clearly.

To open a space for communication between art and audience was key for Mary Jane Jacobs's concept of art as a mode of conversation, which aimed to generate dialogue across many levels of art production and art appreciation. As curator for the 1996 exhibition *Conversations at the Castle* in Atlanta, Georgia, she presented a multimedia and multilayered model for increasing and diversifying conversations with the audience.<sup>20</sup> She stated that

Art can matter, it can move the beholder, relate to and be a useful and necessary part of many people's lives, irrespective of their social and economic circumstances," [...] and that "the same work can speak to many different audiences simultaneously and allow multiple points of access that draw upon (the) many types of knowledge."<sup>21</sup>

Critical for confronting a narrow monolithic and elitist position and widening into a more inclusive and dialogical approach to presenting art is the shift from the visual to the auditory. Homi Bhabha has wanted to break through the silence that "traditionally accompanies the awesome presence of art."<sup>22</sup> He suggests that to shatter the cultural silence around the art object, and to shrink the distance between subject and object, the role of reason as the primary source of social and cultural value will have to be unsettled, and the sovereignty of visuality unseated.<sup>23</sup> In his view, with a conversational art practice

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Jane Jacob. "Reaching the Goal: Curating Conversations." In Mary Jane Jacob with Michael Brenson. Eds. *Conversations at The Castle. Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Art Festival of Atlanta. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998. 15-29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 17.

<sup>22</sup> Homi Bhabha. "Conversational Art." In Mary Jane Jacob. Ed. *Conversations at The Castle. Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Art Festival of Atlanta. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid: 42.

that allows for complexity and contextual contingency, the artwork becomes a “creative site of unplanned directions and multilayered interpretations” that is key for an ongoing dialogue between the expectations of the audience and the intention of the artist.<sup>24</sup>

If the specificity of art, how it is perceived and received by its audience, depends on the chosen location, as well as its timing, it is also directly linked to the commitment of the artist. Belmore’s performances were highly dramatic, emotionally compelling and spontaneous site-specific interventions. The site she chose for the performance of *Vigil* (Fig. 13a, b) was the inner city neighborhood where the missing women had been living and working in the sex trade; this became the active space for recreating the conditions that had led to the women’s disappearances.

Signifying women’s symbolic representation, in reference to women’s work and women’s sexuality, Belmore scrubbed the street on her hands and knees, preparing the stage for herself as the ‘scarlet woman’ in a seductive red dress. The performance conveyed the material and concrete manifestations of violence; the gesture of nailing the dress to a wooden fence, the sound of the ripping material recreated trauma, the acts of violence. Symbolic of ‘woman’s purity,’ a bouquet of flowers recreated the identity of the women; represented by as many red roses, the artist ravished them once again, fiercely pulling the roses through her teeth, gagging and spitting, the thorns drawing blood. With corporeal and emotional intensity Belmore asserted the importance of the body, she reenacted social and sacred ritual, analogous to women’s experience, and to spiritual ceremonies like the Sundance or the rite of crucifixion. Ritualizing identity, she had written the names of the women with thick black felt marker on her arms, suggestive

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 40.

of the identification numbers written on the arms of inmates of concentration camps. This gesture was a marker of identification and a branding, an image that Suzanne Lacy had used in a street performance **-Myths of Rape** (1977) (Fig. 6)- to portray rape. An act of naming, Belmore read the names of the 65 disappeared women aloud, screaming them one by one. She shattered the silence of the performative space, and by speaking for the silenced women; she became their voice, their (loud) speaker.

Several of Belmore's works have literally given voice, given people the opportunity to speak and to be heard. **Ayumee-aawach Oomama-wowan: Speaking to their Mother** (Fig. 14)<sup>25</sup> Belmore's large wooden megaphone amplified the voices of several elders of the Native community addressing the Earth Mother. Belmore explained that the structure of the megaphone did not make the voice much louder, but projected it further so that it found an echo, and that the sound and the acoustics changed depending on the site where it was placed.<sup>26</sup> At first installed in the Rocky Mountains, Belmore later traveled with it to various urban, rural, and reserve sites in Canada and the US, where it became the focus for a series of communal events. As a social ritual for personal and collective negotiation, it served as the active space for what is heard and what is spoken.

In a different setting *Mahu-che-witowin: A Gathering of People for any Purpose*<sup>27</sup> brought the voices of eight Native women from Belmore's Northern Ontario community into the *National Gallery* in Ottawa. An interactive work, the empty chairs representing the women, allowed visitors to take their places and listen to their personal

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<sup>25</sup> The 1991 performance was part of the *Between Views and Points of View* exhibition at the *Banff Center for the Arts*.

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Belmore cited by Debbie O'Rourke. Debbie O'Rourke. "An Artist in the New Wilderness. Interventions by Rebecca Belmore." *Espace* 42. (Winter 1997-98): 29.

<sup>27</sup> *Mahu-che-witowin* was an installation at the *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibition at the *National Gallery* in Ottawa in 1992.

stories and concerns. Belmore talked about the changed significance of *Mahu-che-witowin* when she installed it later in a storefront in her community of Thunder Bay. She wanted to “take it out of the ivory tower, bring it down to street level, and invite people to come.” She reported that many non-native people came to see it, but the hoped for interest from the Native community did not materialize. The incident made her question her belonging to a community, non-native or native, and her identity and effectiveness as an artist.<sup>28</sup> Belmore’s intention as an artist is to communicate through art, to present a different viewpoint, and provoke her audience to see things differently.<sup>29</sup> Changing perceptions requires a visual shift, and a different voice. To change the narrative, the stories have to be told differently, and the roles reversed; to be heard and seen requires a change of space. Reversing locations the video recording of *Vigil* brought the street performance into the gallery space, however the raw site-specific performance in situ in a destitute neighborhood did not lose much of its dynamic impact when presented in the aesthetically different non-site of the white cube. Many visitors to the exhibition have remembered especially the vocal utterance, Belmore screaming the names of the sixty-five women, as the most compelling and moving aspect of the exhibition.<sup>30</sup>

Where the video loop of *Vigil* conveyed the violence of the street performance, Belmore’s action before the opening of the second segment of *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition at the *Art Gallery of Ontario* in Toronto in May 2003, symbolized a different kind of violent death. The sedately hushed rooms of the AGO where a group of silent people had gathered for the opening were acutely unlike the setting of the

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<sup>28</sup> Richard William Hill. “It’s Very Rewarding if it Works: James Luna and Rebecca Belmore. *Fuse Magazine* 24, 1 (June 2001): 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*: 33.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interviews with several visitors to *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition.

Downtown Eastside street corner. Again, the rose symbolized the bodies of the women, but here their death was utterly silent. In a mute performance, Belmore immersed the roses one after the other in a bucket filled with white plaster and pasted them -petrified and whitened- on the museum wall, an evocative bas-relief memorial.

Giving voice to Native elders' concerns for the environment, to Native women's apprehensions of their places in community, and to the names of women from an unsafe neighborhood, Belmore speaks for all those silenced and excluded by the implications of their gender, their class, and their race. Changing places with another, reaching out further to elicit an echoing response, and calling out the names of the missed, will bridge the in-between spaces and the gaps. Her work illustrates that change is not smooth and singular, but uneven and complex, and that recreating the identity of the body requires negotiations on many levels of experience. The etymological root of the word negotiation is 'not/quiet,' and it is the noise of enunciation that breaks the silence about the women's identity.

### **Public Secrets (bodies)**

Charlotte Townsend-Gault, co-curator (with Scott Watson) of *The Named and the Unnamed*, has talked about a 'public secret' as "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated." Citing Michael Taussig, she described how public secrets are recognizable by an act of defacement, of desecration.<sup>31</sup> Belmore's performance has articulated the public secret of the women missing from Vancouver's Downtown

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Taussig. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999. 5. In Charlotte Townsend-Gault and James Luna. *Rebecca Belmore. The Named and the Unnamed*. Vancouver: The University of British-Columbia. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2002. 19.

Eastside. In the majority sex-trade workers the missing were predominantly socio-economically impoverished women, who tried to live off prostitution, and struggled with drug addiction; and at least half of these women were also Native. Located within discourses of gender, race, and class, the violence experienced by these women opened a performative space for the injustices involving the disenfranchised. The narrative outlining the circumstance of the events has to be read on multiple levels.

The decade-long open secret -women disappearing from the Downtown Eastside at a rate of three to ten per year- was largely ignored by the police. By 2004, an almost four-year investigation had uncovered a large percentage of the remains of the missing women in the soil of a property in Port Coquitlam B.C. An extensive process of sifting through dirt and looking for bone fragments or other potential evidence revealed that the remains to be identified were the DNA. The bodies had disappeared, presumably eaten by the pigs kept by the owner of the property, Robert Pickton, a pork farmer turned real estate developer. It appeared that what brought the women to the suburban locality was their work as prostitutes, their deaths circumstantial and job-related, but not accidental.

A public secret, according to Taussig, is determined by ambivalence: people look but do not want to see, they see but do not want to know. Prostitution as a social phenomenon has been constructed around curiosity and disgust, outrage and compulsion mainly as a moral issue. John Lowman professor at the *School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University* in Burnaby BC was the recipient of the 1997 *The Nora and Fred Sterling Prize in Support of Controversy at Simon Fraser University*<sup>32</sup> for his

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<sup>32</sup> The *Nora and Fred Sterling Prize in Support of Controversy at Simon Fraser University* honors and encourages work in any field that provokes controversy or contributes to its understanding. <http://www.sfu.ca/sterlingprize/about.htm>.

commitment to challenging prostitution laws as hypocritical and discriminating. Although prostitution is legal, soliciting is not and historically only the women and not the men have been held accountable for the purchase of sexual acts. In Canada the 1985 Communicative Law, which makes the customer and the vendor equally responsible, has addressed this disparity to a certain extent, however it has not solved the problems related to the criminal aspect of prostitution.<sup>33</sup> Without decriminalization, even ‘shame the johns’ attitudes, and progressive one-day ‘john school’ programs,<sup>34</sup> or recommended ‘cottage-industry’ models of prostitution<sup>35</sup> cannot change the moral stances and perceptions which are at the root of the discrimination and marginalization of women working in the sex trade.

Lowman believed that the “physical and symbolic marginalization of prostitutes makes them easier targets for sex-offenders and misogynist predators.”<sup>36</sup> Anti-prostitution rhetoric, and ‘discourse of disposal’ policies, have precipitated the increase in violence by relegating the sex workers to locations where they are out of sight of the offended general population, but precariously exposed to predators and crime. He supports programs for ‘harm reduction’ as viable choices for people who make a living in the ‘contact sex service trade.’<sup>37</sup> Alan Young, professor at Osgoode Hall Law School, agrees saying, “regulated prostitution would increase the security and safety of all participants. Criminalizing prostitution has accomplished nothing but enrich pimps and gangsters and turn prostitutes into the prime targets for serial killers.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid: 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid: 16.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid: 5. Cottage-industry models were a recommendation of the Fraser Committee. Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution 1983.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid: 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid: 2.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Young. “Justice Defiled” [http://www.missingpeople.net/prostitution\\_laws\\_make\\_murder\\_ea.htm](http://www.missingpeople.net/prostitution_laws_make_murder_ea.htm).

Investigations in the Pickton case have revealed that the conditions in the Downtown Eastside were indeed advantageous for a serial killer, although the actual circumstances and motivations have so far remained obscure. The question as to why (and how) men kill prostitutes has preoccupied many people, especially since the Jack the Ripper case, as the extensive literature written about it attests. One of the most newsworthy crimes, serial murder seems to be especially engrossing. The conditions for violence are predicated by a social milieu of moral shame and disapproval of sex-workers, and the sentiment that they bring upon themselves the violence they experience.

Prostitution, the 'oldest profession in the world' is shaped by gender, ethnicity, occupation, socio-economic status and cultural values. The problem of prostitution, with its ethical underpinnings and underlying socio-economical conditions, has not changed significantly since Victorian standards reinforced a biased view of women's place in society. As markers of historical analysis, these conditions and viewpoints serve to uncover present-day popular beliefs. Elizabeth Wilson has outlined that historically the fear of women's uncontrolled sexuality, and its consequent suppression by moral codes, went hand in hand with the oppression of women.<sup>39</sup> Sexuality and gender are not only biologically based but socially constructed terms; the human body is lived in culture. Elizabeth Grosz has challenged the dichotomous thinking whereby "the body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory."<sup>40</sup> She asserts that the oppression of women consequent to

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Wilson. *The Sphinx in the City. Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.6.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. 4.

the devaluing of the physical body is inherent in Cartesian dualist thought, which has aligned the inferior body with women and the superior mind with men. It is based on “the assumption that there are two distinct mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere,”<sup>41</sup> and that “the primary term of the equation defines itself by expelling the other and in this process establishes its boundaries to create an identity.”<sup>42</sup> Grosz believes that this split between supposedly incompatible characteristics like mind and matter cannot be resolved by reductionism, which privileges the one and rejects the other as inferior, and denies any interaction between both.<sup>43</sup> She suggests that by “declaring women’s bodies as active and creative, rather than merely passive and reproductive, the ‘volatile body’ can be a site of contestation in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.”<sup>44</sup> The body in this view

Provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other [...].<sup>45</sup>

Both aspects of a polarity have to be seen simultaneously and comprehended as complementary rather than antagonistic, and the body, placed in the gaps, the in-between spaces of binary terms, actively negotiates both principles as temporally and spatially mutable, and open to change. Nancy Duncan has addressed the correlation of body and space, and outlined the various feminist investigations of an “epistemological viewpoint

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid: 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid: 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid: 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: 20.

based on the idea of knowledge as embodied, engendered and embedded in the material context of place and space.”<sup>46</sup> She has argued that the binary distinction between private and public spaces and the relation of this to private and public spheres is highly problematic; especially for marginalized groups such as women and -even more so- abused women and sexual minorities such as sex workers. Rigid definitions of private space as domestic, intimate, personal, and embodied, and public space as rational, cultural, civic, political and disembodied have been instrumental in the oppression of women and their sexuality. She proposes to destabilize the boundary, and to “open up not only private space but to reopen public space to public debate.”<sup>47</sup>

Duncan has pointed out that prostitution in particular has contributed to the transgression of the public/private distinctions; historically a ‘public woman’ was considered immoral in contrast to a ‘public man’ -a statesman- who held the power in society.<sup>48</sup> A feminist reading of 19<sup>th</sup> century morals exposes a bi-polar image of women as Madonna and whore, which prescribed female purity within the home, whereas women appearing in public without a male consort were seen as morally and physically diseased.<sup>49</sup> The discourse of the public/private gendering of space constructed the domestic sphere as a protective and safe yet confining place for (upper-class) women, kept as precious property, in contrast to the street where economically less privileged

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<sup>46</sup> Nancy Duncan. Ed. BodySpace. Destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Duncan. “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces.” In Nancy Duncan. Ed. BodySpace. Destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 127, 128.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 139.

<sup>49</sup> Cynthia Hammond citing Lynda Nead. Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain. Oxford, New York: Blackwell, 1988. 202. In Hammond, Cynthia Imogen. Wings, Gender and Architecture: Remembering Bath, England. PhD Thesis in the Department of Humanities. Concordia University, 2002. 178.

'fallen' women of 'ill repute' were forced to work as prostitutes.

The street can be constructed as representative of colonized, rejected, and marginalized groups: the poor, the criminal underworld and not only certain women, but women in general. It can be seen as a designated area for the socio-economically and psychologically excluded, for the people placed outside of power structures and institutional order. The street in this sense is an 'other space,' as Mary McLeod following Foucault defines "out-of-the-ordinary places, which expose the messy ill-constructed conditions of everyday reality," [...] and with that "provide our most acute perceptions of the social order." She describes that his list of heterotopias includes the brothel as place of disorder, and that "heterotopic environments, by breaking with the banality of everyday existence and by granting us insight into our condition are both privileged and politically charged."<sup>50</sup>

Mary McLeod, agrees with Henri Lefebvre's model of the social production of space, where gender and space are interrelated. She argues that Foucault's theories are problematic for women, as he does not include the places traditionally occupied by them. She finds that Foucault seems to have a disdain for locations of everyday life such as the home or the workplace, which are often the very places inhabited by women; in her view these were spaces where women were not only suppressed, but could claim a certain amount of freedom as well.<sup>51</sup> The home, as a place of production, not merely reproduction, to a certain extent allowed women an active life of socializing and networking inherent in cottage industries, food-production, and child-rearing, as well as a

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<sup>50</sup> Mary McLeod. "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces." In Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden. Gender, Space and Architecture. An Interdisciplinary Introduction. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 184.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid: 187.

degree of power of decision-making and independence. Prostitution, in exposing societal double standards and established gender-roles, situated women in a liminal space between moral shame and the assertion of independence, with the function of destabilizing boundaries of public and private.

Linda Mahood, analyzing 19<sup>th</sup> century prostitution, has wanted to emphasize women's capacity for agency rather than seeing them, as "passive objects of social policies." Moreover, she wanted to avoid portraying women as either agents or victims, and found that they were able to make certain choices.<sup>52</sup> Cynthia Hammond agreed with Mahood's strategy to "emphasize the indicators of woman's choice."<sup>53</sup> She believes that "prostitution was neither simply a matter of innate evil (in men or women), but rather the choice of women with very little choice."<sup>54</sup> The socio-economic model shows that it was usually necessity and choice that caused women to find work as prostitutes, and not the result of women's vice and sinful unrestrained sexuality. However, moralistic Victorian perceptions of prostitution as the 'great social evil,' concerns for sanitation and disease, and fear of infection (physical, moral and social), continue to motivate decisions concerning prostitution linked to poverty and slum-living.

Belmore's performance, through the identification of the nameless and bodiless women, establishes the parameters for community, for living and working conditions in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. It links prostitution with other social issues like

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<sup>52</sup> Linda Mahood. The Magdalenes. Prostitution in the nineteenth century. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Cynthia Imogen Hammond. Wings, Gender and Architecture: Remembering Bath, England. PhD Thesis in the Department of Humanities. Concordia University, 2002. 90.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid: 217.

substance abuse, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, and crime, as these are imbedded in the socio-economic and ecological implications of urban development and gentrification. In addition, the women's place of death in suburban Port Coquitlam highlights the implications of that region's urban sprawl and rapid demographic growth, and consequent environmental degradation. The Pickton pig farm as the 'ground zero' for violence implicates pork production as one of the most chemicalized and polluting types of agri-business. The pigs, kept in confining pens, are dependent on stringent sanitary measures, and addicted to high doses of daily medication to fight infection. The high cost of the drugs in turn creates the farmers' financial dependence on pharmaceutical companies.

The violated bodies of the women from the Downtown Eastside are embedded in the violated body politic. Societal marginalization is not different from ecological marginalization; problems with agricultural monocultures based on exclusion have shown that the eco-system depends on a diversity of microorganisms to be healthy and balanced. Environmental groups in the Vancouver lower Mainland region continue to protest the privatization of public land and water resources, and demand increased public review and control, in terms of not only provisions for the protection of clean drinking water, wildlife, or recreation, but also for acknowledgment of First Nations unceded titles.<sup>55</sup>

The excluded and colonized Other are not only the peoples of First Nations heritage or women, but also the environment. The Name of the Other -like the Name of the Father in psychoanalytical theory- is constructed from oppressive and hierarchical power structures. Naming the Other and telling the secrets of oppression, enacting the

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<sup>55</sup> <http://greenparty.bc.ca/news/2004/03/66.php>.

transgressions and violations of the bodies of women and men, for Belmore meant performing ritual in public space; this has meant both, the urban environment and the 'land.'

*Speaking about Landscape, Speaking to the Land* provides a permanent active space at the *Art Gallery of Ontario*; curated by Richard Hill it brings together a number of works from Native and non-Native Canadian artists. It is intended to contextualize 'Canadian landscape' within First Nations' perceptions of 'land' and -as Hill has written- the "changing notions of the land and the politics that inflect our understanding of place."<sup>1</sup> The 'center piece' of the exhibition, Belmore's **Ayumee-aawach Oomama-wowan: Speaking to their Mother** (Fig. 15), stands out, not only by its central position in the room, commanding size, and crafted materiality, but even more so by its transcendental conceptualization of addressing the 'Earth Mother.'<sup>2</sup>

This chapter highlights Belmore's activist concern for the natural world, where an expanded notion of marginalization and violation involves the environment as much as the people who inhabit it. Her conception of nature is inseparable from a social context, and assuming an ethical and inherently spiritual position, she opens a space for ritual that is not only social and secular but sacred as well. Her artistic and social production is anchored in the body; it is a three-dimensional personal and public process of asserting beliefs, which I have expressed as 'spacing ethics.' By acknowledging a spiritual dimension of ritual space, Belmore's works suggest how to become a participant in

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<sup>1</sup> Ongoing display of works from the permanent collection at the Fudger Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario, curated by Richard Hill. This exhibition can be considered as one of the recent efforts made by several Canadian museums to integrate Native artists with 'mainstream' artists in their exhibitions. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2003. <http://www.ago.net/navigation/flash/index.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> This information was gained from interviews with several visitors to the exhibition in April 2004.

transformation and offer possibilities to envision ‘the other side of violence.’ BeDuhn’s concept of the Manichæan Body presents a historical religious and ethical model for dealing with violence; it proposes negotiating conflicting and binary polarities by maintaining an ongoing interaction between both positions in an active space that is grounded in the body. By inviting participation in ritual, in community, the violated bodies of the ‘other’ can be performed in a space that is as much politically motivated and socially concerned, as it is compassionate and inherently sacred.

### **Environments**

**Ayumee-aawach Oomama-wowan: Speaking to their Mother** (Fig. 14) -Belmore’s large wooden megaphone- was a ritualized instrument for personal and collective negotiation; it transmitted the voices of First Nations communities speaking about their concerns for the environment, for the ‘Earth Mother.’ To broadcast a message to an anthropomorphic image of nature is not an inconceivably mystical idea for Native peoples. Rather than a Western rationalized progress-oriented and appropriating stance towards the natural world, Native voices have maintained that the earth is a living system, its continued exploitation provoking grave consequences. Jeannette Armstrong has explained this spiritual world-view for her own Okanagan language culture: “Our word for people, for humanity, for human beings, is difficult to say without talking about connection to the land.”<sup>3</sup> The perception of a personalized spiritual experience of ‘land’ inherent in Native thought, where nature and culture are interrelated in a unified whole

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<sup>3</sup> Jeannette Armstrong. “Sharing One Skin. Okanagan Community.” In Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith. Eds. The Case Against the Global Economy. And for a Turn Toward the Local. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996. 465.

has been asserted by Robert Houle, a Native artist, who believes that without the unifying language of spirituality a collective sense of identity remains incomplete.<sup>4</sup> Belmore, beyond a traditional Native identification with the natural world, has moved towards an inclusive collective, political, and spiritual perception of nature, formulated as “we are of this land.” She considered this motif central for her work, and believed that “we are all connected.”<sup>5</sup> An integral phrase in her artist statement, this situates a transcendental experience of the living environment in common ground. It characterizes art making that offers more than a view, but conceptualizes a quintessence of nature, a spatial sense of place.

Recreating a sense of place in the gallery space, **Wana-na-wang-ong**, (1993) (Fig. 16) a site-specific work, was an evocative installation handcrafted from natural materials, cedar branches, lichen, moss, and sand. A ‘real’ piece of nature, it was at the same time an abstract representation of a place near her home that Belmore had often visited and felt deeply connected with. The translation of its Anishinabe title *Wana-na-wang-ong* reads “sandy, curving and beautiful,” which Belmore translated it into a protectively holding yet open form of two rounded vegetal panels, suspended to enclose an octagonal sacred space filled with sand. A collaborative work, it included poetry by her sister Florence, and brought together the visual and the cerebral into a *gesamtkunstwerk* that involved all the senses. The smell of the vegetation blended with the scent and taste of a pot of cedar tea offered to visitors from a low table set with cups and a wrapped bundle. With the votive offering of a singular bowl filled with ground

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault. Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada. Ottawa, Ontario: National Gallery of Canada, 1992. [Catalogue]

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Belmore. Personal telephone conversation. March 4, 2002.

cedar wood emphasizing the ceremonial sacredness of the space, it celebrated a profound sensuous and spiritual affinity to nature and invited contemplation.

A wall text written by Belmore asserted that “this is not about landscape, it’s about land,” underlining a holistic (and political) experience of the natural world, embedded in her identity as Anishinabe.<sup>6</sup> Lee-Ann Martin, writing about the exhibition, explained that landscape painting has traditionally implied a degree of separation and detached observation for the viewer, and that it has in Canada become “a metaphor for an artistic and cultural history” in which Native artists were excluded.<sup>7</sup> With *Wana-na-wang-ong* Belmore wanted to deconstruct any notions of an objectified nationalized perception of landscape that has reinforced a dominating and exploiting attitude towards nature as well as the excluded other. Homi Bhabha described how the experience of a collective nationalistic vision of landscape is imbedded in everyday life. He wrote:

The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its form of collective expression.<sup>8</sup>

For Belmore affinity to the ‘land,’ to the environment, has meant inserting the history and past of First Nations people into the present with the profound realization, that the land is still colonized, however many inroads for liberation seem to have been made. Unlike 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers with measuring devices, the present day (corporate) colonizers are the Multinationals, the IMF and the World Bank in control

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<sup>6</sup> Lee-Ann Martin. *Rebecca Belmore: Wana-na-wang-ong*. Poetry by Florence Belmore. Vancouver, British Columbia: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1994. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 14.

<sup>8</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. Ed. “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation.” In *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990. 295.

with monetary power structures. Power issues directly affect the lived environment when economic interests conflict with people's needs and wellness; chemical agriculture and biotechnology are a growth industry, while the quality of food and water declines. Interests represented by Free Trade organizations such as GATT and the WTO weaken environmental regulations worldwide. The lives of indigenous peoples are particularly implicated in public policies; a disproportionate number of nuclear storage sites across the U.S. are on their lands, jeopardizing the physical and mental health of the residents.<sup>9</sup> Contaminated nuclear test sites adjacent to Native land have been designated as 'National Sacrifice Zones' -areas that are too contaminated for human habitation- by U.S. and Canadian governments.<sup>10</sup> Native communities continue to be sacrificed by a political system subscribing to environmental racism. While First Nations people are often more directly impacted, unopposed power structures of globalization and consequent environmental degradation will affect all, Native and non-native, race, class, and gender identities notwithstanding.

Stuart Hall has recognized the implications of a homogenizing globalization, which erodes not only national and local identities but also an ecological consciousness as well.<sup>11</sup> His proposed solution of decentralized forms of social and economic

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Scheiner. "Nuke Dumps on Native Land." May 19, 1992.  
<http://nativenet.uthscsa.edu/archive/nl/9205/0082.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Tariq Hassan-Gordon. "The Legacy of Nuclear Energy in Canada." October 17, 1997.  
<http://sisis.nativeweb.org/clark/oct17can.html>. Michael Dolan. "While protesters cry foul, the U.S. government prepares to throw open the gates of the nation's first permanent plutonium graveyard."  
<http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/0598/9805dispafter.html>. Jonna Higgins-Freese and Jeff Tomhave. "Race, Sacrifice, and Native Lands." EarthLight Magazine #46, Summer 2002.  
[http://www.earthlight.org/2002/essay46\\_sacrifice.html](http://www.earthlight.org/2002/essay46_sacrifice.html).

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity." In Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 25.

organizations, the “return to the local”<sup>12</sup> corresponds to the call for bio-diversity from the bioregionalist camp and from Native groups concurrently. Bioregionalism revolves around the idea that small sustainable communities built on economical, ecological, and socio-economical cooperation and decision-making are preferable to a centralized globalized societal structure. Embracing diversity and de-centralized shared power structures, this describes the societal model of many indigenous communities that colonizers have been trying to eradicate.

Linking the political with the sacred, Belmore’s sense of place and love of the natural world reveals conjunctures with ecofeminist thought. Charlene Spretnak, an ecofeminist writer, has outlined these ideas:

To care emphatically about the person, the species, the great family of all beings, about the bioregion, the biosphere, and the universe is the framework with which ecofeminists will address the issues of our time.<sup>13</sup>

Ecofeminism seeks heterogeneous strategies and solutions from within feminist discourse, that have to be life affirming, consensual and non-violent. With roots in the radical ‘deep ecology’ and ‘green’ movements and feminism, this is not a monolithic and homogenous ideology, but combines diverse concepts and actions participating in the ongoing nature/culture debate. Mary Mellor has explained that ecofeminism recognizes “a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination of women.” She has clarified that the various strands of ecological orientations -anywhere from ‘shallow’ or ‘light green’ to ‘dark green’ and ‘deep’ -agree

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid: 30.

<sup>13</sup> Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein. Eds. Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990. 12.

on the one fundamental premise:

Human embeddedness in the environment is related directly to human embodiment. Ecological impacts and consequences are experienced through human bodies.”<sup>14</sup>

Mellor argues that most feminist theorists have failed to address the materiality of human embodiment, and that from an ecofeminist perspective the body –and with that the sex/gender distinction- cannot be seen as entirely socially constructed, that “social constructions do not begin from a blank slate.”<sup>15</sup> Resistant to essentializing, the recognition of a link between the subordination of women and that of nature is hinged on structures of domination by a patriarchal and hierarchical socio-economic system.

Indicating that the all-pervasive, all-inclusive, and wide-ranging consequences of environmental degradation are an inherently spiritual issue, Belmore’s **Temple** (Fig. 17) affirmed a religious/spiritual dimension of societal problems; it represented, in her words, “the temple in all of us.”<sup>16</sup> An installation at the *Liasons* exhibition at the *Power Plant* in Toronto in 1996 it was her rendition of deeply felt concerns about environmental –and particularly water- pollution. Arranged in evocative sinister beauty, it was a sculpture of more than 2000 transparent plastic milk bags, filled with water, taken from Toronto taps, the Don River and Lake Ontario. Contrary to popular notions of water as a clear colorless substance the collection of plastic water bags shimmered in a multitude of shades anywhere from light yellow to yellowish brown. The bags were mounted on the surface

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Mellor. *Feminism and Ecology*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 1, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid: 9.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Belmore. Personal telephone conversation. March 4, 2002.

of a metallic incline, and cascaded down the other side in a sharp drop, an abstract rendition of a wave. Its triangular form was doubled by a second sculptural installation, the construct of a staircase that -other than the plasticized ramp- was accessible to the public. A small telescope -set up at the top of the stairs- pierced the gallery wall and permitted viewing the lake outside the gallery; however, as Marilyn Burgess reported, visitors apparently thought they were watching video footage.<sup>17</sup>

The work brought to mind *Ceiling Painting* a 1966 installation by Fluxus artist Yoko Ono. There the visitor climbed a ladder to find a magnifying glass attached to the uppermost rung, which when held up to the ceiling revealed the writing of a singular tiny word “yes.” What Belmore’s installation communicated was not as positive. A third part of her piece was a fountain, the kind installed in public parks for dispensing drinking water. Belmore’s offer to taste the water was allegedly ignored by visitors, perhaps doubting the fountain’s functionality in the gallery setting, or else rejecting the polluted substance as non-drinkable.<sup>18</sup> Working with paradoxical real/unreal tropes, indicative of the complex and undecided meanings and effects of public policies, Belmore’s installation pronounced a disturbing graphic message of environmental degradation.

In a system of social hierarchy based on domination that places the ‘one’ over the ‘other,’ the notion of centrality is allegorical for centralized power, for top-down control and surveillance from the outside. However, a spiritual epistemology perceives the center as an interior point of reference, a momentary place of stillness, necessary for ‘arbitrary closure.’ The center becomes the space of oneness, where polarized binary oppositions

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<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Burgess. “The Imagined Geographies of Rebecca Belmore.” *Parachute* 93 (March 1999): 3-20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 13.

can be actively and endlessly renegotiated, and the tension held by accepting the paradox. With the center at the periphery of another adjacent circle, the margins of one are the center of the next. Speaking from a marginalized position, Belmore's works have proposed to bring the margins into the center; for her the 'journey to the center' has included a spatial experience of the land, the natural environment, and a place of belonging, of community.

**The New Wilderness** (Fig. 18), her contribution for the 1995 SITE exhibition *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* documents such a 'journey to the center.' A Nomad artwork in progress, Belmore kept a journal and took photographs during the drive south to the SITE show in Santa Fe; she also bought 168 pottery mugs (the stereotypical commercial kitsch kind sold at tourist shops) to commemorate the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. *The New Wilderness* combined the principal aspects and concerns of Belmore's oeuvre: An emphatic response to current events of social crisis, it reached for wider definitions of identity and community; it performed the violations of people as well as those affecting the environment, overlaid with ethical and spiritual significance. In a ritual performance she created an installation by filling each of the mugs with soil samples from their place of origin. On site in Santa Fe the compressed earth molds -sun-dried in the local adobe technique- were mounted on metal rods and 'planted' into a flowerbed-like gathering evocative of votive offering candles. The mugs were shattered and recycled into a multicolored mosaic imbedded in local clay; a wall-like piece blocking access in one of the exhibition room's doorways, it illustrated dead-end solutions to social and environmental problems. Belmore's response to the commodification and commercialization of culture exposed the fall-out of unequal power

structures that affect the environment and the inhabitants of 'Mother Earth.' In her words: "The new wilderness that we live in now is, of course, this violence within our own fence, within our own territories."<sup>19</sup> And Debbie O'Rourke warned, that the colonized other cannot be excluded indefinitely. She wrote:

In the new wilderness where government has abandoned its social responsibilities and handed all of us over to the tender care of the corporations, we may not all be First Nations people, but soon we will all be Indians.<sup>20</sup>

### **Rituals (community)**

Yet the 'new wilderness' can also locate opportunities for change, it can be a place of annunciation for a message of individual and social liberation and integration, a space for transformation. Belmore's works, addressing the socio-economical implications of an exploitive and destructive treatment of the natural environment, are the expression of political as well as ethical and spiritual concerns. The degradation of the environment cannot be separated from the violence and abuse suffered by people who -regardless of their ethnicity- become victim of power structures, which deny democratic debate. For Belmore, and for many other Native artists, strategies for expressing concern have been performances of ritual, ritualizing functions of social critique, which relate to community. Rituals are symbolic social codes; communicated in an intuitive non-rational mode beyond the visual, they shift into a spiritual level of experience.

Ovide Mercredi, in his function as the leader of the Assembly of First Nations from 1991–1997, proposed to assert Native spirituality and ritual within political life,

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<sup>19</sup> O'Rourke cites Rebecca Belmore. In Debbie O'Rourke. "An Artist in the New Wilderness: Interventions by Rebecca Belmore." *Espace* 42 (Winter 1997/98): 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*: 30.

characterizing -as Townsend-Gault has written- “an enduring belief in the efficacy of ceremony or ritual as a vehicle for personal and social negotiation.”<sup>21</sup> Many Aboriginal artists have been uneasy about traditional values and rituals, for their stereotypical and historical and therefore repressive connotations. Instead they have used irony and, as Townsend-Gault found, “other processes that explore the boundaries between the recovery of historical forms and inventive ways of reincorporating them.” She described the social concern of Native artists: “their expressive forms may be unique, and in that sense individualistic, but they are concerned to make them speak about, and for, a group, a community, a nation.” And, although working within a postmodern aesthetic, they were “edgily aware that postmodernism can be just another lockout, its supposed pluralist hospitality becoming an excuse for avoiding the issues yet again.”<sup>22</sup> It is particularly through ritual in its traditional and new artistically modified forms that, to quote Townsend-Gault again, “ethical issues become overt, in as much as they are what drives the process and can hardly be disentangled from the aesthetic strategies involved.”<sup>23</sup>

An exploitive and appropriating stance towards nature has been opposed by ecologist, ecological feminist and Native voices alike; it is by performing its inherently violent embodiment that Belmore creates a ritual space for the dialectical critique of an oppressive conceptual framework that is based on domination and subordination. The underlying sense of apprehension and violence insinuated throughout the installations and performances included in *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition was exceptionally

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault. “Ritualizing Ritual’s Rituals.” *Art Journal* 51, 3 (Fall 1992): 51.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 53.

invoked with **The Great Water** (Fig. 19), Belmore's installation representative of 'wilderness.' Antithetic to the all-white quilted tidy tranquility of *blood in the snow* (Fig. 11), its black expanse of disturbed and agitated canvas flooded the gallery floor and a capsized empty canoe. By proposing a definite change in color, with black signifying death in Western thought, the piece underlined a sense of accidental violence, of loss, emptiness, and an absence of people. With a different reading the materiality of the canvas conceptualized water's essential blackness and textured movement, and with that illustrated the cyclical and prevailing aspects of nature, signs of life. As surface for painting canvas can be seen as the medium diametrically opposed to nature; however, Belmore's canvas was neither painted nor stretched, its persistent wavy rendition of water asserted 'wilderness.'

The canoe -the epitome of Aboriginal culture- had been appropriated by the colonizers as an instrument of colonization. It enabled invasive settlements, historical trade transactions, and nationalized perceptions of art, pioneers, fur traders, and Group of Seven painters alike. However, by its title, *The Great Water* implied that not the canoe, but the element that carries it is the champion. If a swamped canoe represents the failure to conquer nature then its form and black color signify hope. Stranded in the interstices of the nature/culture debate, the canoe situates civilized 'man' (and woman) in their proper places of respect and reverence towards nature. James Luna, co-writer with Townsend-Gault for the catalog for *The Named and The Unnamed*, invited to respond to Belmore's exhibition, chose to write in script form for a (future) performance. His poetic rendition of *The Great Water* reflects his sentiment for the forces of nature; it reads:

I am humbled by the force of water and the elements. Chugged down, engulfed and swallowed deep down in spiral motion.<sup>24</sup>

The canoe's incapacity to float was contra-indicated by what Townsend-Gault has defined as the proverbial "floating signifier."<sup>25</sup> **Song** (Fig. 20) was an installation of one feather only. Of all the works at *The Named and the Unnamed* it was the one most 'natural' and unmitigated by culture, however, tethered on a string the feather symbolized nature tamed. Suspended from the ceiling and animated by the air currents in the room, the (eagle) feather spoke loudly, however mutely, of the narrative of the First Nations. Another eagle feather held by Cree native **Elijah Harper** (Fig. 21), held up the Meech Lake accord, Canada's political pursuit of unity across languages and ethnicities. A potent sign of traditional cultures and histories, and of the voices of the 'other' Canada, it wordlessly challenged constitutional exclusion from the polarized struggle between two peoples and two languages, and asserted the third and First Nation of Canada. The third way, and way-out of locked conflicting oppositions, Belmore appeared to suggest with these works, is the way of the birds and the waters, the place where nature prevails.

The *Song* installation had 'an-other' second and complementary part: **The Cards** (Fig. 22) a number of cards printed with the words of a song were displayed on a small wall shelf. The text, part of a Sioux lament, read like a haiku -sparse words packed with meaning told of loss and death and surrender- they instated narrative and history.<sup>26</sup> An interactive piece, offered to the visitors as a gift, *The Cards* established ritual, and with

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<sup>24</sup> James Luna. "An Indian Artist Sees. Notes on an exhibition of the work of Rebecca Belmore." In Charlotte Townsend-Gault and James Luna. *Rebecca Belmore. The Named and the Unnamed*. Vancouver: The University of British-Columbia. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2002. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 48.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid: 48. The text of the Sioux song: "Soldiers you fled even the eagle dies."

that gesture re-introduced community.

For Belmore community is demarcated by cultural ethnicity, by a transcendental perception of 'land,' and by gender; intersecting publics for her include the sisterhood of women, the relationships of people interdependent with the natural environment, and her native Anishinabe community. What defines communities, contextual contingencies notwithstanding, is irrevocably linked to ethics, to accountability. Belmore remembered the phrase of Ojibwa elder Freda McDonald: "When I do anything I ask myself [...] will it benefit the people?" as shaping her concern for the communal.<sup>27</sup>

Activated by these ethics the personal becomes the political, and art-making - beyond solipsic self-expression- an agent for change and healing. Healing is not always a gentle process, and calls for intent and perseverance. Activist art is a wake-up call to exchange passive dependency with social responsiveness and responsibility. As an activist artist Belmore's intention has been to comment but not to impel, she has proposed suggestions directly responsive to local and global specifics. In the process, she has implicated the audience, and created ritual.

Ritual is a deliberate act of processing the quotidian -the everyday life- of making sense; it can be secular and also sacred. Temporally and spatially delimited, and linking interior and exterior experience, ritual activities are transactional, actualizing a personal and collective shift in consciousness. Essentially embedded in a collective cultural system, ritual is nevertheless personal and anchored in the body. Through its inherent

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<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault. Personal conversation with Rebecca Belmore 1990. Charlotte Townsend-Gault. "Rebecca Belmore." In Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault. Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada. Ottawa, Ontario: National Gallery of Canada, 1992. 113.

aspects of repetition and practice, ritual represents a habitual way of doing, of creating structures of socially acceptable norms and rules. Ritual builds community, but it also questions social order by contextualizing and transforming experience.

Victor Turner has commented on the liminality and reflexivity of performative rituals, their temporal structures creating a space for spontaneous invention and improvisation.<sup>28</sup> In his view this aspect of ritual as a transformative performance highlights and negotiates the intersecting spheres and contradictions of cultural processes.<sup>29</sup> In its many diverse forms, social ritual is transitional and with that reacts to crisis. It places the bodies of its participants in a privileged space deliberately demarcated by social contract.

Charlotte Townsend-Gault defined ritual as “both a social process involving an audience and an act of cultural assertion. [...] it is taking responsibility.”<sup>30</sup> She observed that it was “in some way central to the cultural expression of a large number of Native artists. It is found where that relationship between individual and community is being articulated.”<sup>31</sup> In her opinion the focus on the community was the most important aspect of Native art, which for her was not a category, but a shared socio-political situation.<sup>32</sup>

For Native artist James Luna, when navigating complexities of intersecting communities, it was a matter of responsibility to “bring it back home” to Native communities, including his own on the La Jolla Indian Reservation in California.

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<sup>28</sup> Victor Turner. The Anthropology of Performance. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986. 25, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid: 157.

<sup>30</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault. “Ritualizing Ritual’s Rituals.” Art Journal 51, 3 (Fall 1992): 53.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 52.

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault. “Having Voices and Using Them: First Nations Artists and ‘Native Art’.” Arts Magazine 65, 6 (February 1991): 67.

Performance for him represented the means of reaching and communicating with his audiences; and he hoped to find the right gestures and expressions, to be able to “teach that there is another way.”<sup>33</sup> An effective method of reaching an audience is through irony and parody, and for Luna to be called a clown was a compliment.<sup>34</sup> Humor was also “the first step in recovery.”<sup>35</sup> Luna exhibited himself lying dead (or sleeping) as ‘Indian,’ nude except for a loincloth, in a museum display case complete with ethnological labels recording his personal assets and identifying the scars he acquired during a drinking binge. **Artifact Piece** (1987) (Fig. 23) manipulated the body in a critical and satirical manner to confront representations of being Native.<sup>36</sup> “Luna,” Townsend-Gault wrote, “understands the human body as social instrument. [...] (and) ritual can make it the object of critical thought.”<sup>37</sup>

For Belmore humor was a mask to hide the seriousness of the concerns she wanted to address; it was a way of making her audience think and at the same time reduce their fear and make them feel comfortable, a tool for comic relief and for healing catharsis.<sup>38</sup> Belmore has employed strategies of ironic masquerade to critique social issues, and to expose and dismantle visible stereotypes she has fashioned and worn a number of eclectic costumes. One of them *Rising to the Occasion* addressed the historical

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<sup>33</sup> Richard William Hill. “It’s Very Rewarding if it Works: James Luna and Rebecca Belmore talk to Richard William Hill About the Possibility of Bringing it all Back Home.” *Fuse* 24, 1 (June 2001): 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*: 33.

<sup>35</sup> James Luna quoted by Brandon Cesmat. “North County Performance Artist James Luna to Give Rare San Diego Performance August 21 at San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art.” <http://www.northcounty.com/arts/luna.html>.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/ArtifactPiece.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault. “Ritualizing Ritual’s Rituals.” *Art Journal* 51, 3 (Fall 1992): 55.

<sup>38</sup> Belmore, Rebecca. “Seriously Speaking.” In Allan J. Ryan. *The Trickster Shift. Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 1999. 146.

and standard Canadian government practice of as Allan Ryan has written, “displaying picturesque ‘Indian’ culture for visiting British royalty while ignoring the reality of life in the reserves.”<sup>39</sup>

Belmore’s ritualistic performances negotiate cultural binaries by anchoring them in the body. She re-invented herself as *Crazy Old Woman Child* (1991), a Janus-faced composite figure of an abused Native washer-woman and a sexy white ‘lady of leisure’ in a country-and-western outfit, dual aspects of one woman’s experience.<sup>40</sup> Role-playing comical characters that speak for her serious concerns, Belmore described her persona of the *High-Tech Teepee Trauma Mama* (1987), as “a trickster figure, who flips from being intensely serious to a kind of wise fool.”<sup>41</sup>

The figure of the fool functioned historically as the ruler’s shadow and ‘other’; it held the mirror for socio-critical confrontation; Native cultures have personified this challenging and social critical function as the trickster. In Cree mythology the humorous gender-neutral figure of the trickster had the central function of linking the consciousness of humanity and divinity. Tomson Highway explained that the trickster “translates reality

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<sup>39</sup> Allan J. Ryan. *The Trickster Shift. Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 1999. 211. Belmore created and wore this costume for the visit of Prince Andrew and his wife to Thunder Bay in 1987. Belmore explained that it was meant to symbolize Canada: the front a Victorian fancy gown complete with tea cups, the back a collection of trinkets and cheap trade goods including pictures of the royalty stuck in a beaver lodge. The headpiece sported a stereotypical feather and two ‘Indian Princess’ braids; sticking up like antennas they are sensitive to issues of societal injustices and unresolved colonial patterns. *Rising To The Occasion* was part of a 1991 exhibition held at the Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University, Mar. 12-May 18, 1991; traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Aug. 10-Nov. 3, 1991 and three other American museums through Nov. 29, 1992. In *Interrogating Identity*. New York, N.Y.: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1991. *Rising To The Occasion* is now in the collection at the National Gallery, Ottawa.

<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Belmore. “Crazy Old Woman Child.” In Allan J. Ryan. *The Trickster Shift. Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 1999. 88.

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Belmore quoted by Lacey, Liam. “Native Artist Puts New Spin on the Western.” *The Globe and Mail* 22 September 1990. P. C-3.

from the supreme being, the great spirit, to the people.”<sup>42</sup> Combining binary values, the trickster is a symbol for the union of opposites, both interrelated and necessary for their existence, like the Taoist Yin/Yang symbol or the ouroboros in alchemy. With a socio-political as well as a sacred-religious function the trickster in native cultures, by means of satire and parody, acts as a safeguard against fixed positions and dead-end extremist ideologies.

Lucy Lippard recognized the danger inherent in “emphasizing cultural identities, which can encourage rigidity rather than openness and flexibility in self-definition.”<sup>43</sup> Morris Berman as well has advocated openness and a sense of humor to maintain detachment in realizing objectives and ambitions, to allow contradictions. He understands it as a necessary precaution against violent fanaticism, and the “blind assurance of revealed experience; it throws us back on ourselves, gives us some psychic distance from the things we are so certain of.” He introduces the notion of reflexivity, to describe the “ability to see (and observe) ourselves in a state of need and commitment.”<sup>44</sup>

He asserts that one of the primary human needs is to make sense of experience, to find meaning, and connectedness, and that the pursuit of happiness and salvation is an inherently spiritual urge for wholeness. The perception of a basic ‘fault’ or gap in people’s consciousness, a riven experience of being suspended between two opposing forces contributes to feelings of alienation and despair.<sup>45</sup> Conceptual binaries like

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<sup>42</sup> Allan J. Ryan. The Trickster Shift. Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art. Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 1999. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Lucy R. Lippard. Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.152.

<sup>44</sup> Morris Berman. Coming to Our Senses. Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989. 309.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid: 23.

Self/Other or good/evil cannot be dealt with by indefinitely repressing one and asserting the other, but by a dialectical approach of negotiation and integration. Berman believes that an alternative to dualistic thinking is practicing a 'kaleidoscopic' view, one that observes and integrates the many facets of experience.<sup>46</sup> To bridge the gaps between contradictory binary structures non-dualistic and non-violent solutions hinge on a corporeal awareness of the body, and Berman has articulated this idea as "a life grounded in somatic integrity."<sup>47</sup> By empathically engaging with the corporeal reality of the natural world, the primacy of the body can foster horizontal egalitarian rather than vertical hierarchical societal structures. Beyond a cerebral rational mode of making sense are the mundane everyday-life processes that can be meaningful and with that inherently spiritual.<sup>48</sup> He urges "coming to our senses" and becoming embodied, manifesting a subjective lived corpo-reality that includes all of the senses, including the kinetic.<sup>49</sup>

Berman showed that historically heretical gnostic religions, based on moral and transcendental redemption and personality transformation, functioned by attempting to restore somatic awareness and re-anchor spiritual experience in the body. One of these, the Manichæan creed proposed to maintain and contain perceived duality by separating the two opposing forces in the body and splitting the social body into two groups.<sup>50</sup> Although divided by functions and roles, members of the two social classes interacted repeatedly during formal ceremonial meals. Embodying social codes and ethics by way

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid: 311.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid: 315.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 311.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid: 342.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid: 196. Berman describes the two groups of this dualistic religious community as the Elects and the Auditors.

of a daily ritual meal established identity, by centering ritual on the primary function of food production and consumption the transaction takes place in the physical body.

Jason BeDuhn has shown that fundamental to Manichæan religious thought was attaining salvation, the concern for alleviating suffering and evil, and avoiding violence by way of regimes of discipline and ritual systems of practice. Embedded in a pantheistic and animistic religious belief the consequence of evil and violence in this doctrine was extended to every aspect of the living natural world. It even included the (unintentional) acts of violence perpetrated to insects or grass when walking on the ground, or the destruction of plants when preparing and eating (vegetarian) food. In this view, the result of observing an absolute ethics of non-violence would ultimately be inactivity, a position represented by one of the two societal groups. The other group takes on the active function, and by acceding to the inevitability of violent actions, ritualizes crisis and restores community.<sup>51</sup>

The Manichæan model demonstrates that conflict and violence are unavoidable aspects of the human condition and social life, and that identity and ethics are granted and controlled by performing ritual grounded in a disciplined body. Contrary to other historians BeDuhn argued that this form of ascetic discipline represented not a denial or abandonment of the body, but a religious attempt to connect to it and work with it, to make it an instrument for daily spiritual practice.<sup>52</sup> The Manichæan Body in the view of BeDuhn becomes an agent of sacred (and secular) ritualized performance and transformation, and with that inscribes the body politic.

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<sup>51</sup> Jason David BeDuhn. The Manichæan Body In Discipline and Ritual. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid: 22.

Following BeDuhn the concept of the Manichæan Body provides a context for Belmore's art making, where the body becomes an agent for performance. The violated bodies of the Other can be performed by placing them into public communal sacred space, where the inevitability of violence is redeemed by performative rituals that allow for participation. The 'other side of violence' is the public place for recreating responsibility -the ability to respond and empathize- and responsibility. Collapsing dichotomies, Homi Bhabha has asserted, that "victim and perpetrator, colonizer and colonized, us and them occupy the same psychic space."<sup>53</sup> A separate self is an illusion, made apparent by splitting, by confrontation with the other. Berman has suggested working "your way back to a self/other relationship that is not founded on opposition or confiscation."<sup>54</sup> He explained that engagement with the other is systematically denied in a society that ignores the experience of all the senses of a lived body in social space.<sup>55</sup> Personal identity has to be co-created with other's identities, as a function of social mirroring it is by seeing and recognizing the other -however brief and fleeting- that community is maintained.

Belmore's works have suggested choosing not either the 'one' or the 'other' but accepting 'one-an-other' through artistic ritual processes anchored in the body. *State of Grace* (part of *The Named and the Unnamed*) in particular can be seen as one of these ritual spaces. The bi-polar dichotomous body of a woman and dissected paper surface represented violation and proposed to imagine its resolution: it performed change,

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<sup>53</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. Ed. "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation. In Nation and Narration. London: Routledge, 1990. 300

<sup>54</sup> Morris Berman. Coming to Our Senses. Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989. 51.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

movement, and subsequent healing. The same element -the air- that disrupts the image will also make it whole again, implying that the violence and destruction is time-limited and subject to transformation. The violated and dismembered body can be re-membered and healed by liberating it, by confirming its reality, and remembering its connectedness to others. For Belmore these others were the intersecting communities of peoples and their places in the environment; nature, she seemed to suggest, is all-pervasive and all-present, nature prevails.

*States of Grace* –as described in her book with the same title- for Charlene Spretnak are contingent on engagement, ‘being-in-relation,’ and an empathetic connection to the lived-in natural world; and, in her words, “a consciousness of the unity [...], the sacred whole that is in and around us.”<sup>56</sup> She suggests that what the diverse religious/spiritual ‘wisdom traditions’ have in common is the pursuit to alleviate suffering and structural violence, and promote love, compassion, and salvation. She has observed a widespread reawakening to spirituality, based on peoples’ intentions to make sense of and find meaning in the events and processes of daily life. Her critique of deconstructive postmodernist theory addresses its patriarchal and repressive orientation towards women, and a nihilistic perception of experience as meaningless and isolated from the living natural world, and she has argued in favor of a ‘totalizing narrative’ of the natural world that sees body and mind as interdependent socially contracted behaviors.<sup>57</sup> In her view, beyond essentialist and postmodernist resistance to totalizing categorizations there exists –albeit contingent to contexts of time and space- a transcendental truth of the

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<sup>56</sup> Charlene Spretnak. *States of Grace. The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid: 221.

elemental body. She introduced the term ‘ecological postmodernism’ to describe a worldview that includes an earth-based spirituality, a concern for the ‘Earthbody.’ Rather than postmodernist flatness and detachment she advocated a sensuous, situational, living approach to process.<sup>58</sup>

Spretnak’s sentiments were echoed by Suzi Gablik who called for an ‘ecological imperative,’ to emphasize her hope that, “the task of restoring awareness of our symbiotic relationship with nature becomes the most pressing spiritual *and* political need of our time.”<sup>59</sup> And it is through art that exposes the consequences of an appropriative and destructive treatment of nature that this need can be addressed. She proposed a different mind-set, a paradigm shift in the approach to art -a *Reenchantment of Art*- with the potential to “restore to our culture its sense of aliveness, possibility and magic.”<sup>60</sup> Her term ‘connective aesthetics’ describes art making that is guided by a sense of community and an awareness of the ecological conditions affecting people. She asserted that “in the post-Cartesian, ecological world-view that is now emerging, the self is no longer isolated and self-contained, but relational and interdependent,”<sup>61</sup> and it is informed by “openness to what is other.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Suzi Gablik. *The Reenchantment of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991. 77.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid: 1.

<sup>61</sup> Suzi Gablik. “Commentary. Connective Aesthetics.” *American Art* 6, 2 (1992): 6.

<sup>62</sup> Suzi Gablik. “Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism.” In Suzanne Lacy. Ed. *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

With **Wild** (Fig. 24) Belmore portrayed her ‘Self’ as ‘other.’ A site-specific installation/performance work, part of the 2002 group exhibition *House Guests: Contemporary Artists at the Grange*, it conceptualized otherness in terms of race, class and gender. *The Grange*, originally a privately owned stately house, and now part of the *Art Gallery of Ontario*, was an eminently suitable site for Belmore’s statement about ‘wild Indian women.’ Reclining in a four-poster bed in the elegant master bedroom (‘the best bedroom in the house’) of a colonial upper-class mansion, she was an invited guest in the privileged space of a home where her ancestors most likely would not have been permitted. Inserted into a historical setting she wanted to re-create herself as contemporary ‘woman/native/other,’ and, according to the *Art Gallery of Ontario* website, to “re-dress the bed, and (with that) address the legacies of cultural erasure and restitution, highlighting the stereotypical interpretation of native culture.”<sup>1</sup>

A commentary on the culturally marginalized position of underprivileged Native women, the work aimed to transgress boundaries of gender (and sex), race and class; and it particularly highlighted issues of public and private. By exhibiting herself in a bed, a (typically) private and intimate place made public, Belmore openly and deliberately assumed a vulnerable and potentially compromising, and at the same time powerful and central position. Re-placing the marginalized other, she asserted visibility for those hidden from public sight, and evicted from public space. The public and the private

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ago.net/www/information/exhibitions/house\\_guests/belmore.cfm](http://www.ago.net/www/information/exhibitions/house_guests/belmore.cfm).

spheres, for Hannah Arendt, were defined by “the distinction between the things that should be hidden and the things that should be shown.”<sup>2</sup> For Belmore it has meant telling the public secrets, and revealing the cover-ups concerning those that have been violated. As an activist artist she wanted to speak and be heard; she said in an interview with Paul Couillard: “My work is the voice that speaks on my behalf.”<sup>3</sup>

Many of Belmore’s pieces have engaged the voice as concept and as artistic medium for stating her beliefs. Transgressing boundaries and asserting a place for enunciation was, for Belmore, closely related to affirming her identity as an artist of Aboriginal and marginalized descent, and establishing an active space for addressing these concerns re-positioned her in a central place of agency. Affiliation to a group by tradition or by choice –identification- brings with it a sense of belonging; by contrasting and differentiating, or Stuart Hall’s terms “ambivalence and splitting,”<sup>4</sup> the margins of mimesis delineate the ‘other.’ It is by welcoming difference as non-threatening and enriching, by recognizing that the ‘other is yourself,’ and by realizing that, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “victim and perpetrator occupy the same psychic space,”<sup>5</sup> that divisive conceptual binaries and consequent polarized positions can be critically examined and changed.

By opening active performative spaces for informed processes of concern within society, Belmore’s art can be seen as socially responsive public art; as an activist she

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt. The Human Condition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Belmore, interview with Paul Couillard, January 18, 2000. Toronto. Toronto: Fado Performance Inc. 2000. <http://www.performanceart.ca/time3x/belmore/home.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall. “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.” In Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 47-48.

<sup>5</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. Ed. “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation. In Nation and Narration. London: Routledge, 1990. 300.

responds to current events and delivers a social critique. Working with immediacy and from the present moment her pieces are site-specific -related spatially and conceptually to the site- and they emphasize a relationship to people. Her private concerns implicate the public, and her audiences become participants in re-enacted social dramas that aim to expose injustices and discrimination on many levels. Like other artists working with socially and politically engaged activist art projects Belmore aimed to address environmental and human violation. In particular, her performance included in *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition, *Vigil*, linked her to Suzanne Lacy's projects, which largely dealt with women's issues of abuse and violation. Although different in scope and aesthetic tone, both Belmore's and Lacy's art productions were motivated by their empathetic stance for social justice. Social concern, considerations of women's issues, ecology and spirituality, for Belmore, were overlaid with those of Native matters.

Whiteness and its transgressions were the underlying themes of *The Named and the Unnamed*, Belmore's pivotal exhibition in 2002 and 2003. It brought her into the *Art Gallery of Ontario*, a definite change in her status and recognition as an artist, as she had been mainly exhibiting in small alternative and university campus galleries. By June 2004 she had been selected by the *Canada Council for the Arts*<sup>6</sup> to represent Canada at the 51<sup>st</sup> *Venice Biennale* in 2005. Asked about her reaction to the fact that she will be the first female Aboriginal Canadian artist to exhibit at the prestigious *Biennale* she responded by saying:

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<sup>6</sup> The selection committee for the 2005 Biennale was made up of representatives of the Canada Council for the Arts, Foreign Affairs Canada and the National Gallery of Canada, in association with the Kamloops Art Gallery and the University of British Columbia's Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery. Jann LM Bailey and Scott Watson, Directors/Curators of the two galleries respectively, were the curators for the exhibition.

How it registers with me is, wow, it has taken this long. I don't see it as a coup for me, it basically reflects the reality of the society we live in, in this country called Canada. It is surprising that it has taken this long, but I am glad it has happened finally.<sup>7</sup>

Whiteness, a key concern for marginalized artists, refers not only to skin color, as it defines class, gender and environmental conditions of oppression and domination; for Belmore it has also delineated her profession as an artist and the impact of the 'white cube.' Her nomination for a public event of this importance is particularly significant in view of the mandate of the *Canada Council for the Arts*, as articulated by its director John Hobday, "to support and disseminate Aboriginal art."<sup>8</sup> The "struggle of the margins to come into representation," as Hall has written, "has transformed [...] lives."<sup>9</sup> For Belmore it has meant working through her experience of being suspended between and negotiating the polarities of two cultures. As with any Manichæan set of opposites, to privilege one would mean rejecting the other as inferior, and both have to be brought into representation. To bridge the gaps Belmore has situated her works in the liminal in-between spaces; her images explore the paradoxical and multiple levels of meaning inherent in every situation. Working with installation and performance, and combinations of both media, the negotiations take place in the body, her own and the social body, the body politic.

The violated bodies of sex workers from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, marginalized, underprivileged and most of them Native, and equally the despoiled and

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<sup>7</sup> Sandra Martin writing for the *Globe and Mail*. Tuesday June 29, 2004.  
<http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPPrint/LAC/20040629/BELMORE29/TPEntertainme nt/>.

<sup>8</sup> Canada Council for the Arts. News release. Ottawa, June 17, 2004.  
<http://www.canadacouncil.ca/news/releases/2004/sk127319685800468750.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall. "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity." In *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 34.

polluted environment have elicited her ethical concern. (Women's) bodies have been a much-debated feminist issue, however in the view of some feminists they have, as articulated by Elisabeth Grosz "remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory."<sup>10</sup> Ecofeminists have argued that the body extends to the natural world, that it is not only socially produced but also lived in the world.

Although I would consider her neither a feminist nor an ecofeminist artist, Belmore's take on the environment corresponds with many of these ideas; her connection to nature, 'the land,' linked to an ethical spiritual position, has profoundly motivated her art making. Perhaps the impact of her art on an ever-widening audience is due to an "interest of people to connect to spirituality, based on their intentions to make sense of and find meaning in the events and processes of daily life," as observed by Spretnak.<sup>11</sup> A human need for spirituality and ritual that is manifested in the body has been affirmed by Morris Berman, who described it as corporeal experience of all the senses lived in the world.<sup>12</sup> The concept of the Manichæan Body, a religious/spiritual model for attaining salvation and maintaining non-violence, proposed mediating conflicting dualisms of good and evil through ritual. For this thesis this concept underlined the aim of Belmore's art making to build a social sculpture and perform the social body in an active mutable ritual space. The Manichæan Body also highlighted her embodied position in a "rhetorical

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<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Grosz. Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Charlene Spretnak. States of Grace. The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age. San Francisco: Harper, 1991. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Morris Berman. Coming to Our Senses. Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

space”<sup>13</sup> left empty of meaning,<sup>14</sup> an undecided liminal space between binary polar opposites.

A place for mediation, the “mediatory in-betweenness,” which marks “the human position,”<sup>15</sup> has been staked out by Homi Bhabha when examining the polarity of negotiation and rapture. The first describes a public process of debate and exchange, the second an intuitive non-rational manner of communication with the ultimate ‘other,’ the divine. Both aspects are part of the human position and it is especially through art that the two sides of a binary concept can be (temporarily) seen as one. ‘Seeing in-between’ requires adjusting one’s point of view by ‘looking around’ to see other viewpoints. Rather than digging in and defending one’s territory, taking a stand requires making room for others as well. Bhabha’s concept of contextual contingency allows for possibilities of moving from victim to agent of transformation, for envisioning the other side of violence.

*Wild* and *State of Grace*, two of Belmore’s recent works, are particularly potent signs of violence and non-violence. The enigmatic image of a woman in bed, with a subtext of the classical nude (however decently covered with a quilt), and a sex worker’s workplace, also suggests rest and relaxation, healing and peace. As ritual performances, portraying non-violence, they are reminiscent of a work by Fluxus artist Yoko Ono, **Bed-in for Peace** (Fig. 25), a 1969 collaborative performance with her husband John Lennon. Part of their wider project of various peacemaking ventures, it proposed a radical method

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<sup>13</sup> Lorraine Code. *Rhetorical Spaces. Essays on Gendered Locations*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche quoting Claude Lefort. Rosalyn Deutsche. “Agoraphobia.” In *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1996. 275.

<sup>15</sup> Homi Bhabha. “Aura and Agora: On Negotiating Rapture and Speaking Between.” In Richard Francis. Ed. *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary art, 1996: 10.

for conflict resolution and made a bid for peace. Prompted by the political opposition to the war in Vietnam by peace activists at the time, it embodied the sixties' counterculture maxim 'make love not war.' However much (or little) the *Bed-in for Peace* has succeeded in resolving wars and changing conflictual behaviors on public and private levels, its message continues to inspire peace activists. More recently Ono has worked with media campaigns and installed billboards to relay her continued quest of promoting peace. Her 2003 billboard in downtown Minneapolis reads: **Imagine Peace**. (Fig. 26).

Belmore's performances and installations- ritual spaces to imagine non-violence - can be seen as sites for the narrative of current events, where story-telling functions as a way of making public. Art as conversation, as Bhabha has said, constructs the artwork as a "creative site of unplanned directions and multilayered interpretations."<sup>16</sup> It elicits negotiation, and at the same time rapture; it stimulates dialogue and contemplation. Political will and commitment to debate, as Deutsche has argued, are indispensable aspects of public life. In her words: "Conflict, division, and instability, [...], do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence."<sup>17</sup> On the other side of serious commitment to debate is humorous confrontation, the irrational and transformative function of social mirroring. Representative of two contrary yet complementary aspects, combining a socio-political as well as a spiritual dimension, Aboriginal cultures have imagined the 'union of opposites' as the trickster.

Belmore's art is positioned at this juncture, in a paradoxical ritual space, temporarily demarcated and accessible to envision the invisible, to create possibility for

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<sup>16</sup> Homi Bhabha. "Conversational Art." In Mary Jane Jacob. Ed. Conversations at The Castle. Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art. Art Festival of Atlanta. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche. "Agoraphobia." In Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996. 289.

the impossible. In a profound way, her art continues to activate spaces between the margins and the centers, spaces where meanings remain mutable and open for negotiation.

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## APPENDICES



Fig. 1 Rebecca Belmore:  
Manifesto (1999)



Fig. 2 Rebecca Belmore:  
A Way of Making (2003)



Fig. 3a Rebecca Belmore: Nibiwe/behzig, many/one, \_/\_ (1999)

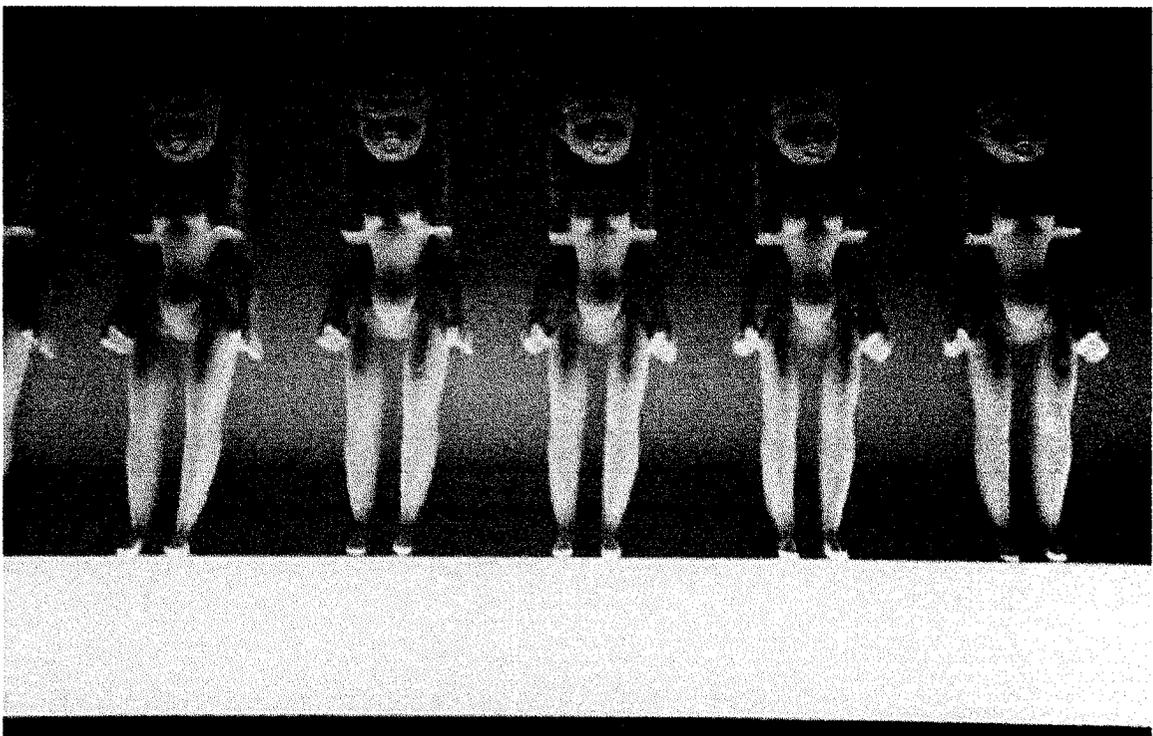


Fig. 3b Rebecca Belmore: Nibiwe/behzig, many/one, \_/\_ (1999)



Fig. 4 Suzanne Lacy: Three Weeks in May (1977)

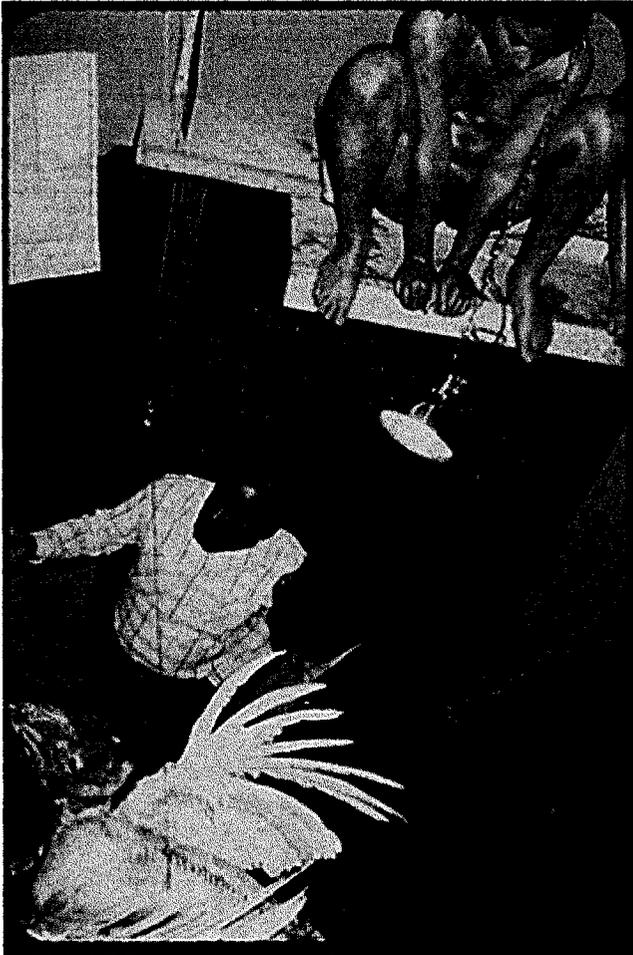


Fig. 5 Suzanne Lacy: She Who Would Fly (1977)

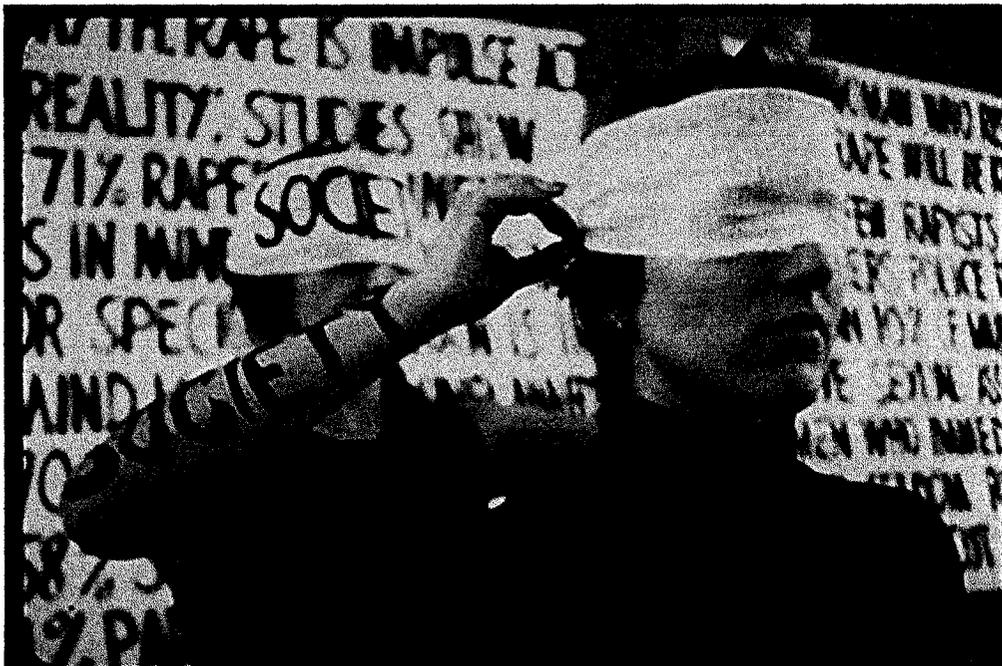


Fig. 6 Suzanne Lacy: Myths of Rape (1977)



Fig. 7a Suzanne Lacy: In Mourning and in Rage (1977)

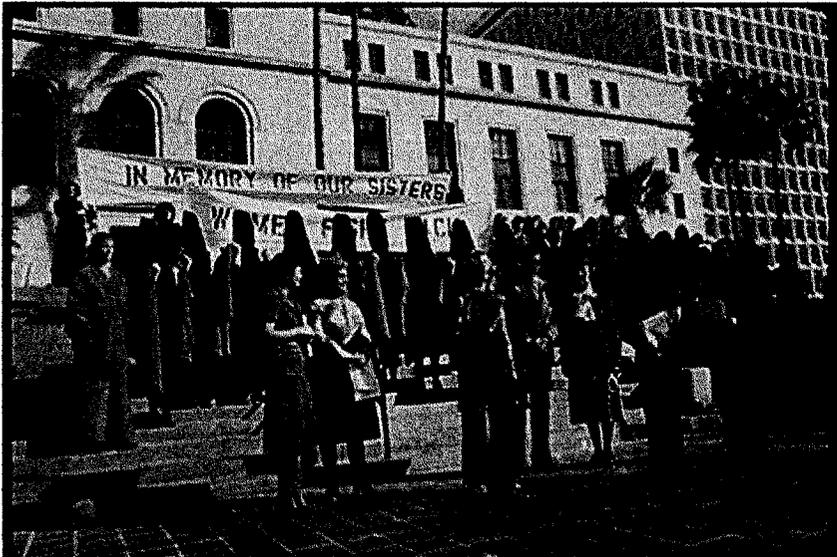


Fig. 7b Suzanne Lacy: In Mourning and in Rage (1977)



Fig. 8 Suzanne Lacy: *The Whisper, the Wind, and the Waves* (1984)

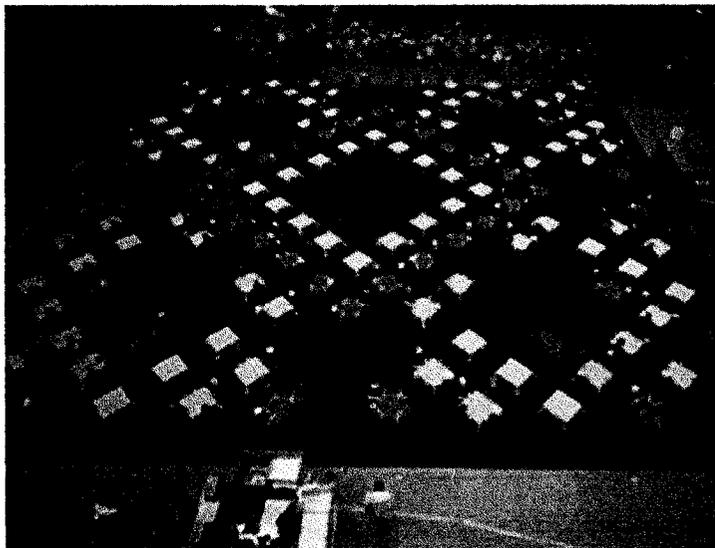


Fig. 9 Suzanne Lacy: *The Crystal Quilt* (1987)

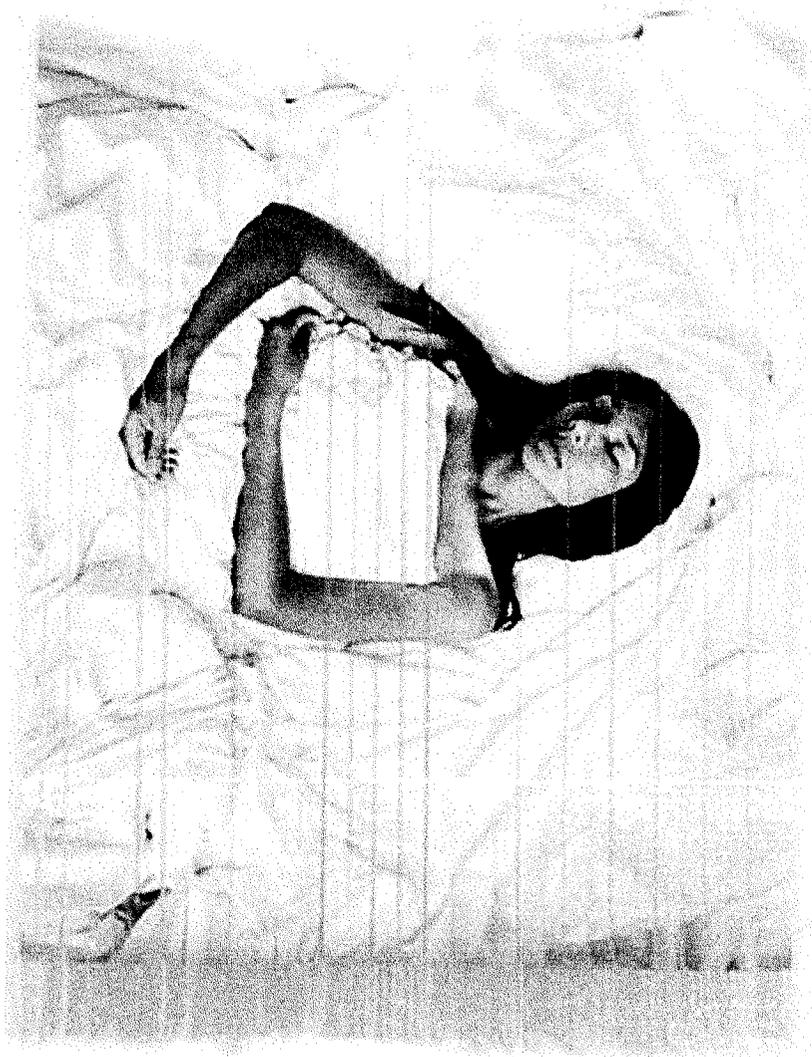


Fig. 10 Rebecca Belmore: State of Grace (2002)

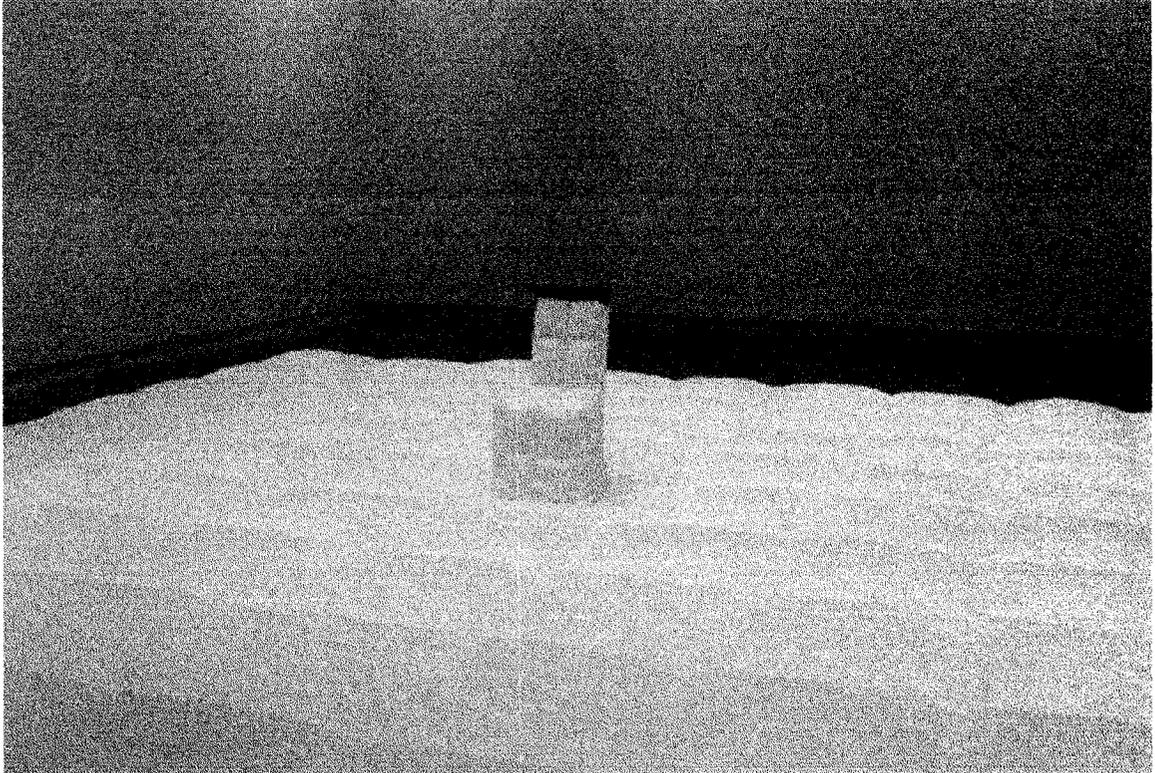


Fig. 11 Rebecca Belmore: blood on the snow (2002)

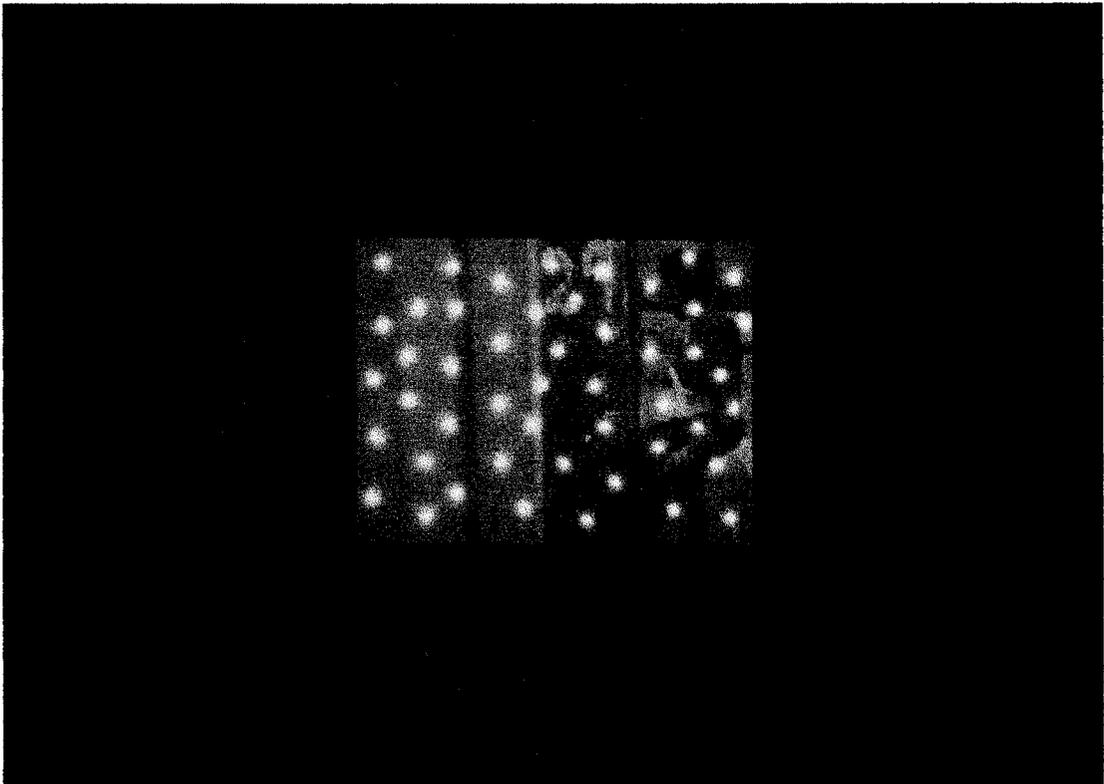


Fig. 12a Rebecca Belmore: Vigil (2003)

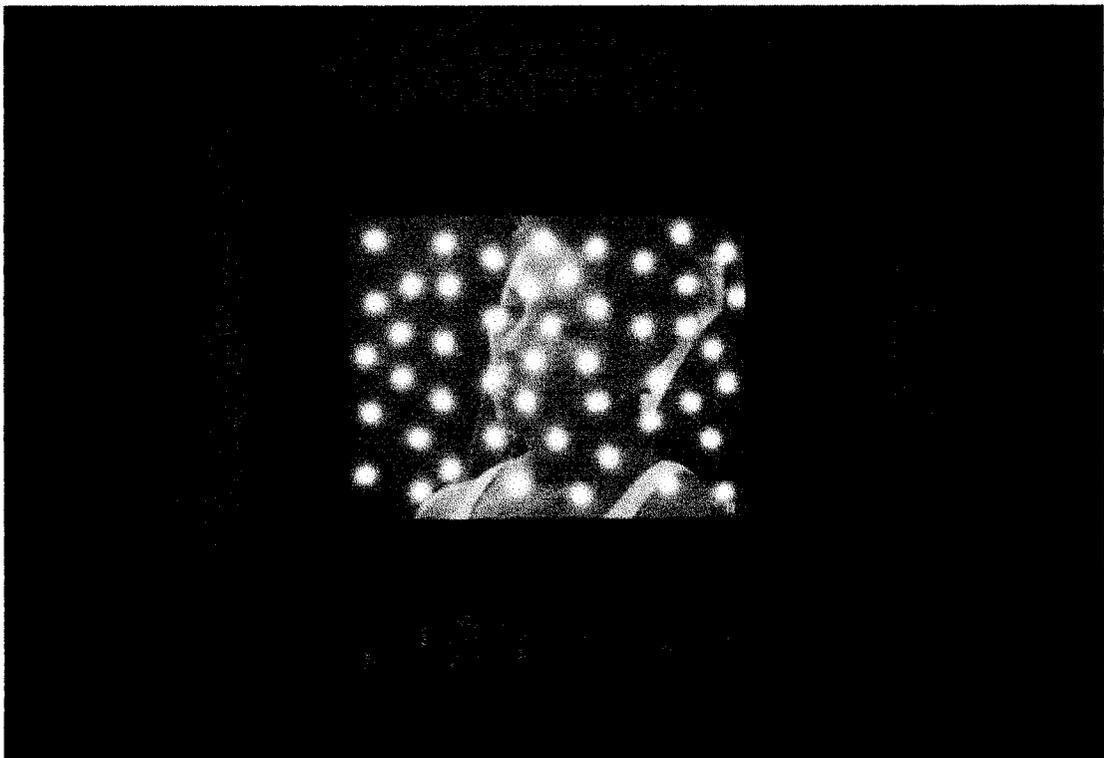


Fig. 12b Rebecca Belmore: Vigil (2003)

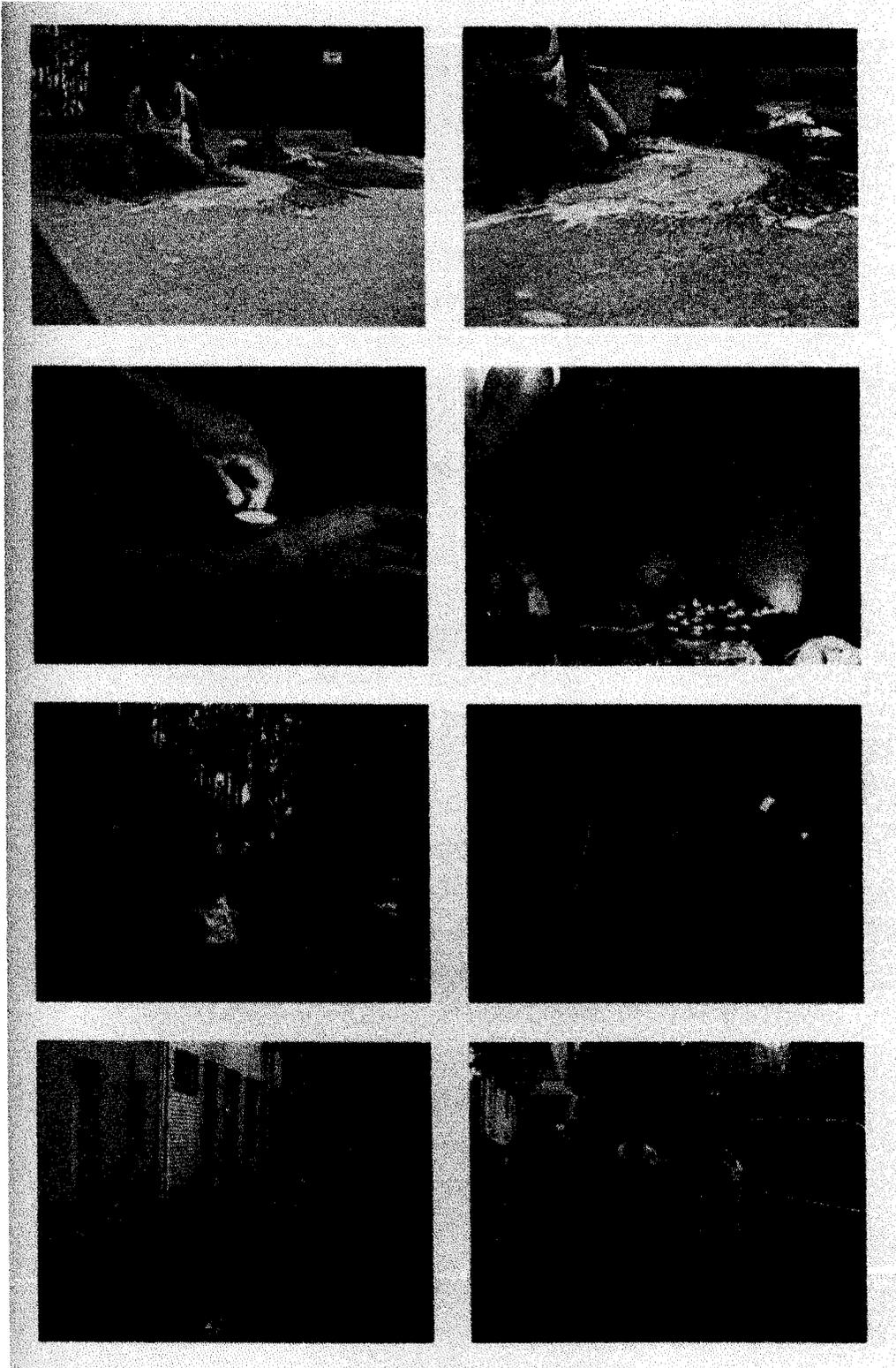


Fig. 13a Rebecca Belmore: Vigil (2003)



Fig. 13b Rebecca Belmore: Vigil (2003)



Fig. 14 Rebecca Belmore: Ayumee-aawach Oomama-wowan:  
Speaking to their Mother (1991)



Fig. 15 Rebecca Belmore: Speaking about Landscape, Speaking to the Land.  
(2003)

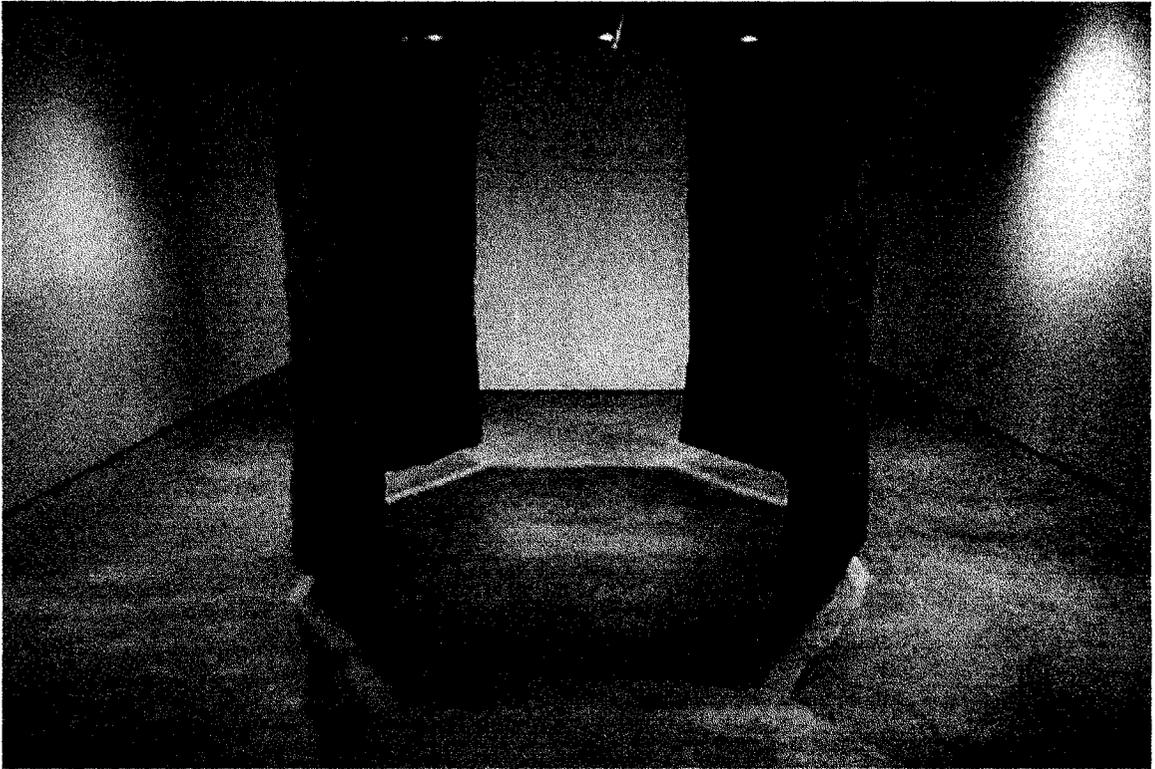


Fig. 16 Rebecca Belmore: Wana-na-wang-ong (1993)



Fig. 17 Rebecca Belmore: Temple (1996)

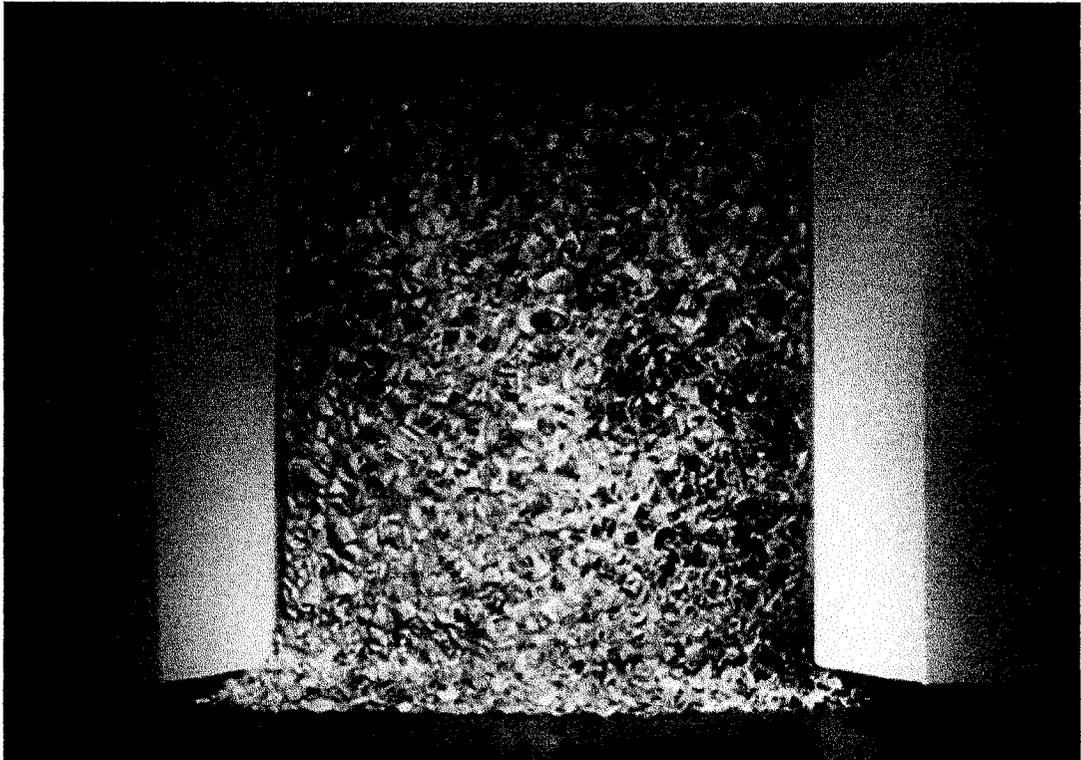


Fig. 18 Rebecca Belmore: The New Wilderness (1995)



Fig. 19 Rebecca Belmore: The Great Water (2002)



Fig. 20 Rebecca Belmore: Song (2002)



Fig. 21 Elijah Harper (1990)

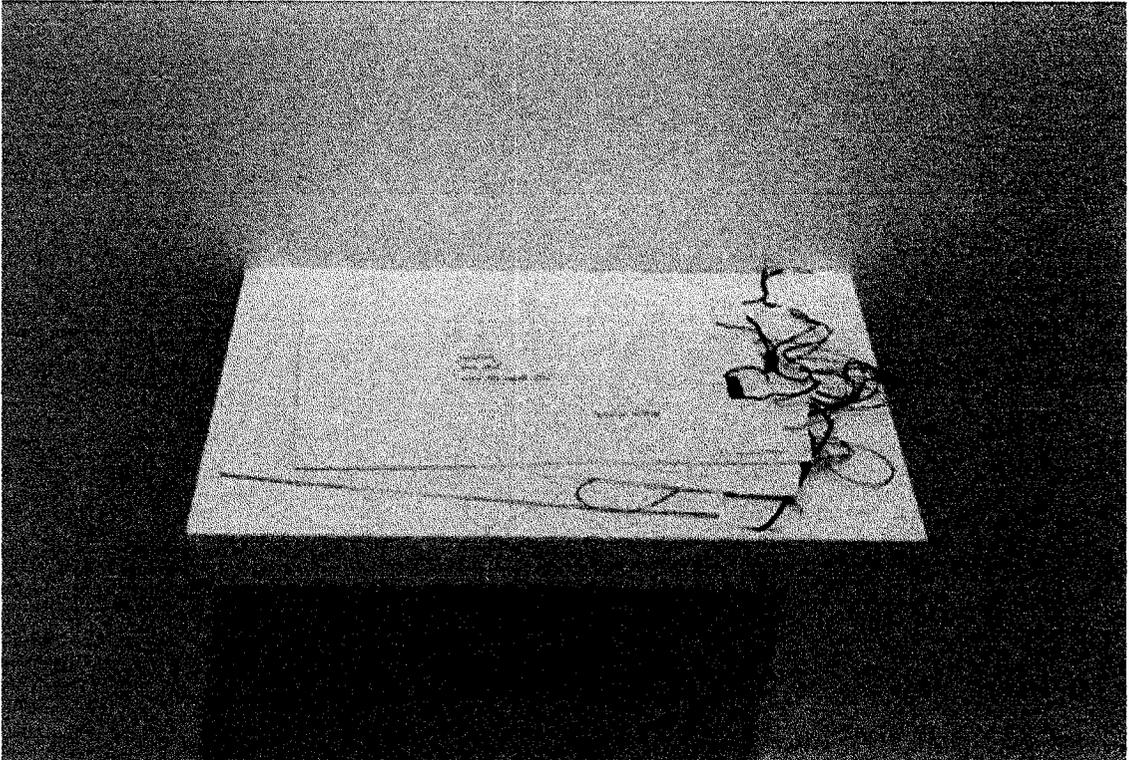


Fig. 22 Rebecca Belmore: Cards (2003)



Fig. 23 James Luna: Artifact Piece (1987)



Fig. 24 Rebecca Belmore: Wild (2001)



Fig. 25 Yoko Ono and John Lennon: Bed-in for Peace (1969)

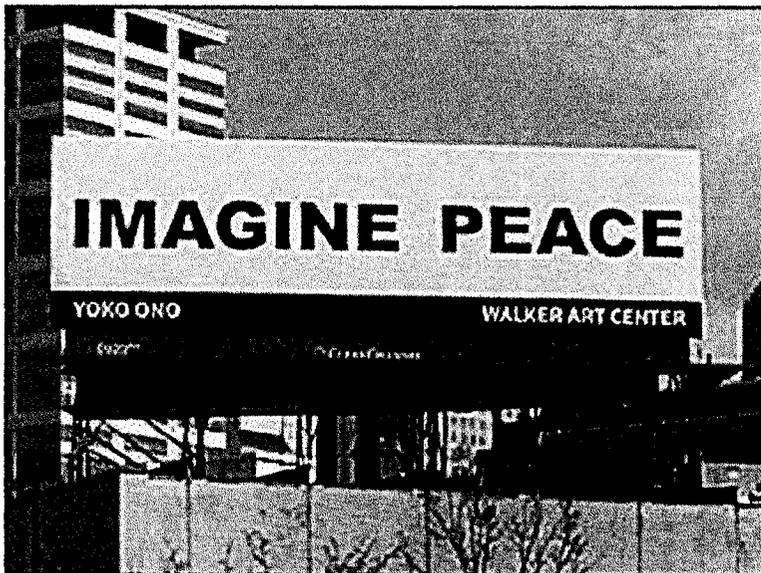


Fig. 26 Yoko Ono: Imagine Peace. (2003)