



Can arts-researchers go where artists go? Questions of interpretation and practice as played out in, and through the work of the Canadian artist, Rebecca Belmore
Donal O'Donoghue
University of British Columbia, CA
donal.odonoghue@ubc.ca

No research act or interpretative task begins on virgin territory (Kincheloe, 2003: 332)

At the mid-career retrospective exhibition of the work of the First Nations Anishnabe artist Rebecca Belmore at the Vancouver Art Gallery Canada in the summer of 2008, I came upon a video-recording of Belmore's performance piece *Vigil*, which was performed on the street in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver in the summer of 2002. The recording begins by showing Belmore arriving, through an alley, to the corner of Gore Avenue and Cordova Street, carrying two buckets of water, a scrubbing brush, red rubber gloves, a clear plastic bag containing a red dress, and bunches of rose stems. Having used a black marker, Belmore has written on her arms the first names of women who have gone missing from this part of Vancouver since the early 1980s. In a squatting position, she lays out on the pavement the objects that she has brought with her. When finished, on her hands and knees wearing red rubber gloves, Belmore begins by scrubbing the pavement. She scrubs in a circular motion, pours water from one of the buckets onto the pavement. It flows into the adjacent alley. On her knees, she follows it, scrubbing as she goes. She works vigorously, and fast. When one bucket of water runs out, and her performance space is scrubbed, Belmore, barefooted, begins to lay votive candles on the pavement, one for each of the missing women. With the help of an onlooker, a young man, she begins to light these candles. After lighting a handful, Belmore stops. He continues. As he lights them one by one, Belmore takes a long red dress from the bag she has brought to this place. On the upright board that shelters the lighting candles from the summer breeze, she lays the long red dress. Then, after picking a yellow rose stem from the ground, she moves towards the small crowd of onlookers, takes a moment to look up, around, and returns her gaze to her right arm. After a moment of looking at the names inscribed on her arm, she calls out loudly the name Sarah, like 'a mother who has lost her child in a dark and dangerous place - with panic, with a fierce passion' (Milroy, 2002: 1). She returns her gaze to her arm. The crowd look on in silence. She searches for another name and then calls out the name Helen after which she takes the yellow rose stem and pulls it through her teeth ripping the leaves and petals and thorns from its stem, which she then spits onto the pavement below. This sequence of repetitive actions continues as she recalls and calls

out the names of these women, one by one: Andrea, Mona, Theresa, Brenda, Frances, Tanya. Her calls reverberate through this place, up, down and across the street and into the nearby streets on this summer June afternoon. Somebody answers back. Belmore continues. And then, almost abruptly, the name-calling stops. Belmore walks in a circular motion, takes the long red dress and pulls it on over her white singlet top. She takes off her blue jeans. Now dressed, with her hands she washes her face, dries her hands, and, taking a hammer and bag of nails she walks to telephone pole across the alleyway where, using one nail and the hammer she nails her red dress to the pole. Then she rips it off. She crosses the lane again, this time to the telephone pole nearest to the lighting candles. Again, she nails her red dress to the pole, this time increasing the number of nails, and then tugs free from the pole leaving fragments of her dress attached. Breaking free takes much effort. She repeats this act several times, increasing the amount of nails she uses as she goes. She pulls free from the pole time and time again, until such time there is only a fragment of the red dress on her body. Worn down by the act of hammering and breaking free, she discards the last remaining fragment of the red dress. Now, vulnerable in her underwear she walks towards the on-looking crowd, gets dressed, jeans first and then shoes. Dressed, she walks over to an awaiting truck. From the stereo of the truck James Brown's It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World starts to play. The lyrics, 'This is a man's world, this is a man's world. But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl' pierce the silence and stillness of the place. And this concludes the performance Vigil.

Removed from the place of performance with all its associated sounds, smells, textures, and ambience including the temperature on that given day, I experienced this piece in a gallery space being shown on 21-inch monitor, and not in realtime. As the cameraman, Paul Wong, focuses in on some moments of the performance, while quickly passing over other moments, ultimately changing the rhythm of the performance in his recording of it, I was reminded that I am looking at a representation of Vigil in compressed time. That he eventually engaged in an editing of his recording of the entire performance obviously alters the work as it was performed. My inability to feel present in the performance was made all the more real by the realisation that my viewing, perception, and to a large extent my interpretation of Vigil was happening not only in a context quite different from that in which it was performed, but, and more importantly, through the eyes of another, and his way of observing ... through the angles he chooses; the moments that he has lingered on, or moved quickly over as he works in, with, and through a different medium (with its own history of emergence and visual and technical vocabulary). Yet, it is being shown as one of her artworks in this show. Unlike many of the passers-by who came upon Vigil unexpectedly on that summer's day as it was being performed at the intersection of Gore Avenue and Cordova Street, I had come upon and encountered this video-recording of Vigil having already seen and encountered a number of works by Belmore on show at this mid-career retrospective exhibition titled *Rising to the Occasion*. In order to get to the space in which this video-recording of Vigil was showing, I had to move through the larger exhibition space showing Belmore's *Fringe*, 2008; *Wild*, 2001; *Shanawdithit*, *The Last of the Beothuk*, 2001; *Rising to the Occasion*, 1987, 1991; *White Thread*, 2003; *Untitled*, 1, 2, 3, 2004; *Untitled (Back to the Garden)*, 2006, 2008; *Untitled # 1 (come in cielo cosi in terra)* 2006; *Untitled # 2 (come in cielo cosi in terra)* 2006; and, *The Great Water*, 2002. Following Vigil, other performances including, *Creation or Death: We Will Win*, 1991; *Bury My Heart*, 2000; *Back to the Garden*, 2006; *Making Always War*, 2008 were shown on this 21 inch monitor, for which I waited and watched. And, thereafter I wandered into the adjoining rooms to see *Black Cloud*, 2001; *Untitled (a blanket for Sarah)*, 1994; *Storm*, 2008; *Fountain*, 2005.

For me, the experience of encountering Belmore's work in and out of context, each piece positioned in relation to another, or several others in public for the very first time is an occasion for interpretation (Sontag, 1964), and it raises questions about how time and place interact with how we interpret, which I will return to later in this paper. It raises a host of other questions also, some of which I consider in this paper. In what immediately follows, I share with you what began to happen when I engaged in a close and contextual reading of Belmore's *Vigil*. Like any other encounter with, and reading and making sense of an artwork, this encounter and reading is, as Griselda Pollock (2006: 17) reminds us, 'framed by the curators, by existing knowledges, by repressed knowledges, by questions that were not possible to frame and pose before but which are now not only possible but necessary'. All art perception involves, Pierre Bourdieu argues in his essay 'Outline of a sociological theory of art perception', 'a conscious or unconscious deciphering operation' (1993: 215). In other words, the perception of an art object (or an art process) by a subject involves acts of decoding, undoing, seeking connections, placing or positioning it within representational possibilities and possibilities of representation and the history of such possibilities, identifying similarities or differences in relation to and with another object or set of objects (or practices) on a conscious or unconscious level, and oftentimes from a place of difference.

Remembering Sarah Milroy's newspaper article of 2002 that reports an interview with Belmore, in which both women discuss *Vigil* among other things, I looked curiously at that which played out in front of me as I encountered the video-recording of this piece for the first time conjecturing in my mind the types of readings Belmore anticipated when she made this work, and indeed when she made available the video-recording of the work to the Vancouver Art Gallery for the purpose of presenting it in this mid-career retrospective. Milroy's interview establishes that *Vigil* was made, in large part, as a response to the disappearance and murders of women from Vancouver's Downtown East Side. For Milroy(2002: 1), *Vigil* 'feels like a raw redemption song, calling up the souls of the women who have gone missing from the hard-core neighbourhood, and giving them their moment of remembrance'. For Belmore, it is the response to the circumstances that the present and the past presents to her as a woman, an aboriginal, an artist, and many other descriptors that describe and classify her life, her work, her cultural heritage, her history, her current position as well as past positions. During that interview Belmore explained to Milroy that an experience that she had as she drove through the Downtown Eastside shortly after she moved to Vancouver from Toronto gave her the idea for *Vigil*. Belmore explains that she 'found herself on the receiving end of some unexpected street theatre', although not street theatre as commonly understood. 'There was this one woman I saw,' she recalls, 'and she was wearing a polka-dot minidress. Her hair was bleached blond, she was in her 50s, she had no shoes on her feet, and no underpants, and the wind was blowing her skirt up. Everyone was gawking and laughing at her, but she was crying'. And Belmore continues: Describing what she saw on another occasion in the Downtown East Side, she tells Milroy she observed a woman dressed in black high heels jump in front of the car, grab her crotch, and start gyrating her hips defiantly at the driver, flipping up her T-shirt to reveal her enormous breasts. 'It was a fantastic performance', she explains, that ended when the woman 'turned on her heels and kept walking, like nothing had ever happened.' (Milroy, 2002).

These types of performances are not atypical in this part of Downtown Vancouver, which is known primarily for its high crime, drug and prostitution rates, and its homeless and First Nations population. The normalizing practices of everyday life are brought clearly into focus in and through the lives of the people who live here on the streets, in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) rooming houses, or in residential hotels. The derelict buildings, boarded

up windows, gated doorways and run-down convenience stores of today were once thriving businesses of one of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods. The first department store Woodward's opened here in 1903. The building is now demolished. And Vancouver's first City Hall was located here, across from the Carnegie Library at the intersection of Main Street and Hastings Street, an area known today to locals by its nickname, 'pain and wastings'. Living and working on the streets, pulling and pushing shopping carts, that hold all that they own, up, down and across alleyways and litter strewn streets, hanging out in doorways, trading drugs, and secrets, and sex is how many locals spend their day in this part of downtown. Those without homes find shelter under make-shift canopies and vacant doorways. The majority of residents live well below the poverty line. As a neighbourhood it has one of the highest reported HIV infection rates in the Western world, a fact that Nancy Macdonald (2008: 18-19) refers to when she claims, 'Today, 85 per cent of the area's estimated 4,000 drug users have hepatitis C, 40 per cent are mentally ill, more than 30 per cent have HIV, a rate of infection not seen outside sub-Saharan Africa, and one in 150 residents is thought to suffer from oral cancer (compared with a provincial rate of one in 10,000). The mortality rate is about 15 times the norm'. And it is to this neighbourhood that Belmore returns to make and perform, *Vigil*.

It was from this part of Downtown Vancouver that several of the women who disappeared without trace never returned. At the time of Belmore's performance, June 2002, 50 women were missing from this neighbourhood. Four months prior to Belmore's performance of *Vigil* at the intersection of Gore Avenue and Cordova Street, almost to the day, Robert William 'Willie' Pickton, a pig farmer from Port Coquitlam (an adjacent city to Vancouver, no more than 27 kms away) was arrested and charged in connection with the disappearance and murder of Serena Abotsway and Mona Wilson, two aboriginal women who went missing from the Downtown East Side, and on April 2, 2002 three additional charges of first-degree murder were added for the deaths of Jacqueline McDonnell, Diane Rock, and Heather Bottomley, while seven days later a sixth charge for the murder of Andrea Joesbury was added, followed shortly by a seventh for Brenda Wolfe. Three months following Belmore's performance, on September 20 2002 four more charges were added for the deaths of Georgina Papin, Patricia Johnson, Helen Hallmark and Jennifer Furminger, and another four charges were laid for the murders of Heather Chinnock, Tanya Holyk, Sherry Irving and Inga Hall on October 3, 2002. Knowing this, shapes my reading of the work. On May 26, 2005, twelve additional charges were laid against Pickton for the killings of Cara Ellis, Andrea Borhaven, Debra Lynne Jones, Marnie Frey, Tiffany Drew, Kerry Koski, Sarah Devries, Cynthia Feliks, Angela Jardine, Wendy Crawford, Diana Melnick, and Jane Doe, bringing the total number of first-degree murder charges to 27, the largest in Canadian history. Between the time of the performance and my first encounter with the video-recording of it at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Pickton has been tried and convicted of the murder (second-degree) of 6 women. These convictions have now drawn to a close the six-year investigation into the disappearance of women in the Downtown East Side. It is in the place where these women worked, and the place that they worked, and the place where many were last seen that Belmore performs *Vigil*.

This knowledge about the artist, the work, the circumstances surrounding the production of the work and the place in which it was performed frames, in large part, how I encounter and position this piece in time and place. Framing, as Robert Entman (2003: 417) puts it, 'entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution'. This knowledge frames especially what I search for in the work as I interpret and make sense. That the video-recording of *Vigil* is being shown in a gallery positions it as something to be contemplated as art, to be perceived and understood as such, as

something that is endowed with meaning, and as a thing that can be placed or positioned within and among possibilities of representation, and the history of these possibilities (Bourdieu, 1993). The title of the work, displayed in the opening frame, encourages me to think of this performance as a call to witness, to observe, or to attend to an observance. Vigil from the Latin *Vigilia*, meaning wakefulness, and Vigil itself commonly understood as a watch formerly observed on the eve of a religious feast with prayer and other devotional practices. But what of the work itself? What opportunities for meaning making reside in this work, in its form and content? What opportunities for meaning making reside in the making of the work as well as in the viewing of the work, whether encountered on the street or in the gallery. What kinds of interpretations does the work itself demand in its forms, formations and articulations? As an artwork, is it, as Nicholas Bourriaud (2002: 22) holds, 'a proposal to live in a shared world'? As the performance plays out on the 21-inch monitor in front of me I can't help but notice that Belmore engages in a place-based act of observance and remembrance. Belmore works on the street, albeit in a different capacity from the women she remembers in and through her performance. It is in their place that Belmore chooses to remember the disappeared women. Although they are no longer there, many of them once walked on this ground. Belmore claims a space at this intersection, and makes it into a particular place at this moment where meaning gets attached through action, interaction, memory, and recollection. In, from, and during Vigil, meaning is read from the place and surfaces of the place as much as it is read from Belmore's actions, and indeed her body: that of the female aboriginal body.

At the beginning of the performance Belmore, on her hands and knees, scrubs the street where she has started to perform this work. But, for what purpose does she engage in this cleansing act? What is she washing away? What is she erasing? What is she trying to uncover and expose? And what gets lost in this act of scrubbing? What gets washed away? Is this an act of marking territory, of claiming ownership, of preparing the ground, or, indeed reclaiming the ground that historically belonged to the Coast Salish peoples of British Columbia? Or is it, as Charlotte Townsend-Gault would suggest one of several elements that make-up a classic ritual? For Townsend-Gault writes, 'The performance included all the elements of a classic ritual: establishing a bounded, liminal space; cleansing ... a purification which puts the protagonist in a vulnerable or dangerous position; the body marked out in some way or identified by special clothing; endurance, repetitive action, release; a closing sequence with a return to the 'real' world (Townsend-Gault, 2006: 730). In short, what significations is Belmore trying to disclose by engaging in this act of cleansing in this public space? Why is she marking territory in a place where the subjects of her performance are and have been marked in particular ways. The question for me is, how is Belmore encountering the street as she cleans it? And, by extension, how has her encounter with the surface of this street shaped how she understands the meaning of this place? Does the act signify the impossibility of ever erasing a presence, even in its absence? For almost twenty years, concerned relatives and citizens had been asking the authorities to investigate the disappearance of these women from the neighbourhood, but it was only in 2001 that an investigation was finally launched. Therefore, could this cleansing act be viewed as an attempt to uncover the forgotten? Is this act of cleaning, of peeling away, an attempt to speak to the notion that memory is contextual, time-based and always present, even when it cannot be seen. There is an intention to her cleaning. What does Belmore find when she removes the layer of grit from the street?

For me, sitting in this gallery space and watching this documentation/representation of Vigil, place becomes central to understanding this work. As a material object where the work is performed, as a container and focus of the work, as a means of preserving

memory and calling others to remember, place serves as both a material thing, an object of study and a means to come to know and understand. In this place, a place associated with, and remembered for violent acts, Belmore engages in a number of violent bodily acts: She tears rose stems between her teeth; calls out these women's names; nails her dress to a telephone pole and pulls desperately on it's fabric, to break free. All gestures and actions function as a metaphor for the struggles of these women and their families (violent and otherwise); struggles on many levels, as aboriginal, as women, as sex workers, and as victims at the hands of their killer; struggles that we will never quite know, but can only imagine. These actions serve as signifiers of endurance and suffering, of a crucifixion in kind. As Townsend-Gault (2006: 730) puts it, 'The crimes against the body, the Native body, the woman's body, are embodied in, enacted by, or inscribed on her own body, as if in an act of atonement'. Her body too is something to be read. As Belmore herself explains, 'I think it has to do with myself being an Aboriginal person and how my body speaks for itself. It's the politicized body, it's the historical body. It's the body that didn't disappear. So it means a lot in terms of the presence of the Aboriginal body in the work. And the female body, particularly' (Belmore cited in Williams, 2005). In, and during Vigil not only does her body come to stand for all those missing bodies, women and aboriginal, but her body is meaning. But, this is one of several interpretations, one of several readings of Belmore's Vigil. It is an interpretation brought about by an ability to situate the work 'among the possibilities of representation constituting the universe of art and not among the possibilities of representation constituting the universe of everyday objects or the universe of signs' (Bourdieu, 1993: 222), an opportunity to encounter a work in the company of other works by the artist, an opportunity to encounter a work in and through the conditions that gave rise to its production, and a familiarity with other readings of the work.

Given that Belmore hasn't produced an object in the strictest sense, rather a set of relations, that give rise to other relations, perhaps another way to engage in her work is to ask the question that Nicholas Bourriaud (2002: 109) presents in his book, *Relational Aesthetics*: 'Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?' This, indeed, is a question that might serve as a way into accessing and evaluating research acts and research practices and products in the visual and performing arts. Firstly, in conceptualising and performing Vigil, Belmore has created opportunities and conditions for an encounter and a dialogue. The possibilities for dialogue are many. On that June day, as can be seen in the recording, people gathered together to view the performance. Some are merely passers-by who just happen upon it, and observe it perhaps out of curiosity. Others have gathered purposely to see it. Gathered, they watch Belmore presenting and living a moment, performing a series of connected acts that signify suffering and remembrance. To them, Belmore offers an opportunity to pause, and to recognize the diversity and complexity of living. Yet, we will never know how the work resonated, or not, with these onlookers. Standing, they witness. They witness in silence. They witness in the presence of another, but they stand still. Clearly, Vigil produces a specific sociability in a place where the experience of time as it is played out in the everyday is altered and changed (Bourriaud, 2002). Performed and viewed in a particular place, Vigil, however, works to put viewers in place, and in a place they are not. Vigil invites the viewers to consider a place of another time, which can only be considered successfully from the present time, given all that has happened. Can they exist in that place? Probably not. Belmore engages in an act of acknowledging and remembering a past that can only be understood in the present and which interacts with the future. From whom then is this work performed and made? The site of the artwork itself offers and extends opportunities to engage in this thought: Geographically and metaphorically Vigil operates at a place of intersection.

Belmore's performance and her engagement with the various components that make up the performance and my engagement with it as a viewer and co-constructor of its meaning as I work to position myself in the spaces she creates, all serve to increase my understanding of, and promote on-going dialogue with the issues presented in and through *Vigil*. It helps me in some way to understand who and what has been lost, even though I will never really know. I stand as a witness and I witness. For example, Belmore summons me (and all viewers of the work) to remember these women as she herself does in the act of calling out their names. The sound of these women's names, called out loudly and fiercely by Belmore, echo up, down, and across Gore Avenue and Cordova Street and spills into nearby streets and alleyways on this summer afternoon in 2002. For me the sound of their names when called breaks the silence of the gallery space within which I stand. In that moment, these women are present through the sound of their names. And yet they are absent. Every time the video-recording of *Vigil* plays in the gallery space the names of these women enter this space to be heard, or to disrupt that which is supposed to happen here. At this moment, in the act of calling out loud these women's names, Belmore makes audible their silence (Crosby 2008). Similarly, Belmore invites us to witness the nature of struggle as she engages with her own struggle (self-inflicted but contingent on that which surrounds her, and a struggle to be lived through in realtime) as she pulls fiercely and repeatedly on the fabric of her red dress, which she has nailed to a telephone pole. This struggle borne in and through Belmore's body signifies the struggles of these missing women, but not their actual struggles of course, for those we will never know.

To answer Bourriaud's question, 'Does this work permit [us] to enter into dialogue? Could [we] exist, and how, in the space it defines?': *Vigil* certainly permits us to enter into dialogue with it, and about it, but it is not a simple dialogue. Rather, it is one that is contingent upon particular knowing and ways of knowing that enable the work to be located, connected to, and understood in the specific narratives from which it draws, and the larger narratives in which it resides. As Joe Kincheloe (2003: 329) would have us believe, 'all narratives obtain meaning not merely by their relationship to material reality but from their connection to other narratives'. Equally, our ability to enter a dialogue with *Vigil* is contingent upon particular knowing that enables it to be situated 'among the possibilities of representation constituting the universe of art and not among the possibilities of representation constituting the universe of everyday objects or the universe of signs' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 222). In other words: the ability to connect the artwork to other artworks and systems of representation is an act of creation, encounter, and interpretation. When these conditions are not met, as Bourdieu (1993) claims, misunderstanding is inevitable. Since Belmore's work and her work practices can be understood as a response to the circumstances that the present and the past presents to her, the act of interpretation then requires a commitment to understanding and locating the discursive, ideological and epistemological contexts that have shaped and formed not only her work but also herself. In not doing this, what do we lose? This argument ought to be extended to all those who show an interest in the work, or 'who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, decoding it, commenting on it, reproducing it, criticizing it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it' (Bourdieu: 1996: 171). So, access is not the same for all those who come to observe, make sense of, and interpret the work. Neither is the nature or quality of the dialogue the same for all viewers. Given that there is some agreement regarding the aims and purposes of research ... to produce knowledge, to inform, to shape and assist in developing and implementing policy, to contribute to change ... is this one of the root causes for growing unease about arts-research in the academy: the problem of interpretation or misinterpretation, of not being able to find a way into the work, and therefore not in a position or not willing to confer value on this type of research work?

Questions of interpretation always raise questions of audience. How does arts-research engage audiences, and specifically, what audiences? Whom do arts researchers address (and hope to address) in and through their research work, which leads to the question who is this research for? For whom do arts-researchers produce knowledge?

To think further in and about these questions, consider the following question: Could a member of the academy in his or her capacity as an arts-researcher do what Belmore did in, and with *Vigil*? Arguably, yes. Under the auspices of academic freedom, a university professor who engages arts-research methodologies ought to have the freedom to speak without fear in the public arena, and perform as Belmore does. But how would the work be understood, made sense of, ranked and evaluated in the academic world? How might it be perceived within his or her own community, the academic community, where, through the citation of scholarly texts, arguments are built and developed; and where research data is understood and analyzed through various theoretical frameworks and analytical practices and applications. Is this where the problem lies? Or, more precisely is it an issue of identification, alignment, group membership and professional practice? Bourdieu's theory of field (*champ*), which for him is any 'social formation' organised around a range of fields that are hierarchically structured - the economic field, the educational field, the cultural field and so on, is a useful theory to consider this question. Each field is 'defined as a structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of those of politics or economy, except, obviously, in the cases of economic and political fields' (Johnson, 1993: 6). And each field 'is relatively autonomous but structurally homologous with others. Its structure, at any given moment, is determined by the relations between the positions agents occupy in the field' (Johnson, 1993: 6). Therefore, if we apply Bourdieu's theory of field to the question can arts-researchers go where artists go, it would transpire that while arts-researchers are able to stake out their difference from other researchers in the academy (i.e. non arts-researchers), and increase their independence from the field of established research on the basis of the work that they do (claiming that it requires different evaluative structures and criteria), they can only do so by being members of the field governed and defined by the laws and functioning of the field. On the other hand, if it is a problem of interpretation, what can a close, critical and attentive analysis and interpretation of an art work/s or art practice offer for thinking about ways of accessing and making sense of research that draws on practices and processes neither defined nor made intelligible by linguistic modes alone? Although it is, I would argue, neither entirely a problem of interpretation nor a problem of identification, but a combination of both and others, in this paper I have taken Belmore's *Vigil* as a case study in kind for the purpose of working through some processes and practices of interpretation that arise not alone from the particularity of the work itself, but also in relation to how, when and where it is encountered by whom, for what purpose and through what particular meaning making evaluative structures, in an attempt to make visible ways of engaging with artworks, and by extension outcomes and products of arts-research, for the purpose of meaning making.

So far, in this paper, in the process of working through Belmore's *Vigil* I have established that meaning resides not only in the work itself, in the relationship between content and form, in the time and place of performance and encounter, and in the nature of encounter, but also in specific narratives surrounding the work that in turn gives it particular meaning and form. Following Bourriaud (2002), *Vigil* in this instance is 'defined as a relational object, like the geometric place of negotiation with countless correspondents and recipients'. This relationist theory of art, as advanced by Bourriaud (2002: 22), holds that 'inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its 'environment', its 'field' (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic

practice'. Hence, the need to attend to the artistic practice as a way of interpreting. To trace where and how Belmore's *Vigil* fits into her larger body of work and practice allows for particular readings to emerge, but equally and simultaneously closes off others. Such an approach, while focusing on the content, is much more interested in what the content offers for identifying and making connections in and across particular themes or ways of working and representing, and for what the content offers for creative interpretative inter-subjective possibilities over time. For example, Daina Augaitis and Kathleen Ritter (2008: 9) claim that 'connections between early performances and later images and objects' in Belmore's work 'occur through a series of recurring motifs: the inversion of official narratives; the labouring, struggling or missing body; the repetitive gesture; and the use of natural materials'. In other authoritative interpretations of Belmore's work (the published writings and exhibitions catalogues of her shows), much is made about the artist's genealogy, cultural heritage and aboriginal status. As the Ojibwa Saulteaux artist, Robert Houle (2008: 19) remarks in his essay in the catalogue for this exhibition, 'Rebecca's art is about us. It is about our history, language, land, pain, hope and right to be ourselves'. Situating Belmore, and her practice firmly in aboriginal issues and traditions, as Houle (2008) does, is one way to frame her work for interpretation, which is not all that different from Robin Laurence's interpretation when he notes her work and practice goes towards exploring issues of 'place and displacement, the lasting impact of colonialism, stereotypes of 'Indianness,' environmental concerns, women's voices and the relationship between land and landscape (Laurence 2002: 42). So this is one way of positioning, placing and making sense of the work she produces.

Another way to engage with the work is to ask, what questions does her artworks raise in the public realm. Specifically, what understandings, concepts, ideas and dialogue arise and get taken-up because of *Vigil*. To think about Belmore's work in this manner clearly positions it in the place of public intellectual work and by extension, Belmore as a public intellectual as defined by Carol Becker (2002) and Edward Said (1994). Said's definition of a public intellectual is particularly salient here. A public intellectual, he explains, is 'someone whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations' (Said, 1994: 11). And Belmore does this in *Vigil* as she has done in other works including *Freeze* (a piece that she produced with her artist husband Osvaldo Yero). *Freeze* comprised eleven large ice-blocks pushed together after she and Yero had carved one letter of the alphabet onto each block. When put together the ice-blocks read S-T-O-N-E-C-H-I-LD. Placed on a concrete floor in the middle of a car wash on Queen Street West in downtown Toronto for 24 hours, *Freeze*, melted through the night changing from hard blocks of ice to a transparent and collapsed mass, as people encountered it, touched it, leant against it in an attempt to understand the meaning of it. A small piece of poetic prose accompanied the piece that gave it some context. It read, 'Last seen alive in police custody / under the influence / found 5 days later frozen to death in a field / wearing one shoe / marks on his body likely caused by handcuff / aboriginal teenage boy / dropped off and walking to where/ In memory of Neil Stonechild (1973-1990) (Crosby, 2008:78). *Freeze* is about remembrance, and the preservation of memory. In a silent way, it serves to recall and remember the final days of an aboriginal teenage boy from Saskatoon. In *Vigil*, not only does Belmore raise embarrassing questions about how the authorities have dealt with the case of missing women from the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, but as the aboriginal body who has not disappeared and which plays a central role in the performance of *Vigil*, Belmore reinscribes Aboriginality into the story of Vancouver's missing women. As Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young (2006: 898) observe, while 39 of the 69 missing women who went missing were of aboriginal descent, 'Aboriginality remained a persistent, though undercurrent, theme throughout the [media] coverage'. As

the present aboriginal body, she raises questions about what it means to live as a social and historical subject in a place.

To reflect on the place of the encounter and its impact on the nature of the encounter provides another interpretative frame, and indeed an opportunity for interpretation. To examine the social conditions of the production of *Vigil* is an act of interpretation. But, of course the question is, does the work ever stop being produced. If we believe that the production of the work ended when the performance came to a close on that summer's afternoon in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, then as we encounter and interpret this work (albeit a video-recording or documentation of the actual performance, but a record and the official record of the work nonetheless), how do we bracket off the information that we now have, but didn't have at the time of performance about the disappearance and murder of these women that Belmore calls us to remember. Because of the high profile and public nature of the Pickton trial, we are now in possession of knowledge about how several of these women met their deaths, and how their bodies were disposed of thereafter. Writing about Walter Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*, 'the time of the now', Griselda Pollock (2006: 16) explains 'the concept is not a simple one that suggests a perpetual, ahistorical present of transcendently universal works of art. Rather, it suggests that each moment of interpretation holds within it a potential for interpretation that may not have been co-present with the event, image or cultural practice at its moment of production' (Pollock, 2006: 16). An interpretation of Belmore's *Vigil* from 'the time of the now' enfolds other and additional understandings from the time it was first performed, even though the form of the piece has not changed. What has changed are the formations that it gives rise to. Making the argument that in observing contemporary artistic practices 'we ought to talk of 'formations' rather than 'form'', Bourriaud (2002: 21) claims that 'form only exist in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise'. But, to what extent is it possible to ever engage in an interpretation that is based on the social conditions of the production of an artwork without doing so from the present, which oftentimes holds or have created new conditions for interpretation.

In conclusion, interpreting how we interpret is in itself an occasion for interpretation. Interpretation happens in time and in place, and changes with and because of time and place. Focussing on one artwork as I did in this paper creates opportunities to think about how interpretation happens in a moment of encounter, and how that encounter in itself creates particular conditions for interpretation. Artworks too, through their form and content, make possible particular encounters. They create certain forms of sociability (Bourriaud, 2002). The narratives within which the artwork is situated, and the narratives surrounding the work itself, which give it meaning in a particular context at a particular time works in different ways. Perhaps we should think about interpretation as situation. For me, the question for arts- researchers is no longer, can they go where artists go, but how much further must they go to make their work accessible to the community within which they are members: the academic community. To do so, is to commit to ongoing development of theoretical coherence and epistemological innovation' (Kincheloe, 2003: 324). Writing about rigour and practice-based research, Michael Biggs and Daniela Buchler (2007: 6) argue 'Academics exist in a comparative competitive environment and must therefore find and place themselves in relation to their peers. They are members of the academic community as a whole and not just a community of kindred colleagues from similar creative disciplines'. There is, of course, widespread public trust, as Kathleen Lynch (2006) points out, that academics will undertake research and teach for the public good. As she claims, 'there is a hope and expectation that those who are given the freedom to think, research and write will work for the good of humanity in its entirety' (Lynch, 2006:

11). For many, Belmore's *Vigil*, a work that was 'enacted, performed, staged, and articulated in and through specific practices of representation' (Pollock, 1994), and a work with far reaching social and political implications 'for the good of humanity in its entirety', became intelligible through practices of interpretation upon encounter. Therefore, without a meaningful commitment to interpretation, arts-researchers as academics fall short of that which is expected of them in the professional and public realm.

References

Augaitis, D. & Ritter, K. Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the occasion. In: D. Augaitis & K. Ritter Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the occasion, (pp. 9-17). Vancouver Art Gallery: Canada.

Becker, C. 2002. *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2002

Biggs, M, A, R. & Büchler , D. 2007. Rigor and Practice-based Research. *Design Issues: 23 (3): 62-69.*

Bourdieu, P. 1996. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Translated by Susan Emanuel). Cambridge: Polity Press

Bourdieu, P. 1993. *The field of cultural production: Essays on Art and Literature*. (Randal Johnson, Intro & Ed.) Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourriaud, N. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses du Réel.

Crosby, M. 2008. Humble materials and powerful signs: Remembering the suffering of others. In: D. Augaitis & K. Ritter, Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the occasion. Vancouver Art Gallery: Canada, 77-92.

Entman, R. 2003. Cascading activation: Contesting the White House's frame after 9/11. *Political Communication*, 20 (4): 415-432.

Houle, R. 2008. Interiority as allegory. In D. Augaitis & K. Ritter, Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the occasion. Vancouver Art Gallery: Canada, 19-23.

Jiwani, Y and Young, M.L. 2006. Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse. *Canadian Journal of Communications*. 31 (4): 895-917.

Johnson, R. 1993. Editor's introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on art, literature and culture. In: P. Bourdieu. *The field of cultural production: Essays on Art and Literature*. (Randal Johnson, Intro & Ed.) Cambridge, Polity Press.

Kincheloe, J.L. 2005. On the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11 (3): 323-350.

Laurence, R. 2002. The Art of Rebecca Belmore. *Border Crossings*. 21(3/83).

Lynch, K. 2006. "Neo-liberalism and marketisation: The implications for higher education." *European Educational Research Journal*. 5, (1): 1-17.

Macdonald, N. 2008. Hitting gold on Vancouver's skid row. *Maclean's*, 121, (32): 18-19.

Milroy, S. 2002. "Trauma and triumph". *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, October 8.

Pollock, G. 2006. Encountering encounter: An introduction. In G. Pollock & V. Corby (Eds.), *Encountering Eva Hesse*. London: Prestel Publishing, 13- 21.

Pollock, G. 1994. Pollock on Greenberg, *Art Monthly*, July-August: 14-18.

Said, E. 1994. *Representations of the intellectual*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Sontag, S. 1966. *Against Interpretation, and other essays*. New York: Dell Publishing Company.

Townsend-Gault, C. 2006. Rebecca Belmore and James Luna on location at Venice: The allegorical Indian redux. *Art History*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 721-755.

Williams, M. 2005. Painting the Town Red: Rebecca Belmore's splashy debut at Venice Biennale. <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/belmore.html> [Retrieved 4 November 2008]

to cite this journal article:

O'Donoghue, D. (2008) Can arts-researchers go where artists go? Questions of interpretation and practice as played out in, and through the work of the Canadian artist, Rebecca Belmore. *Working Papers in Art and Design* 5

Retrieved <date> from <URL>

ISSN 1466-4917