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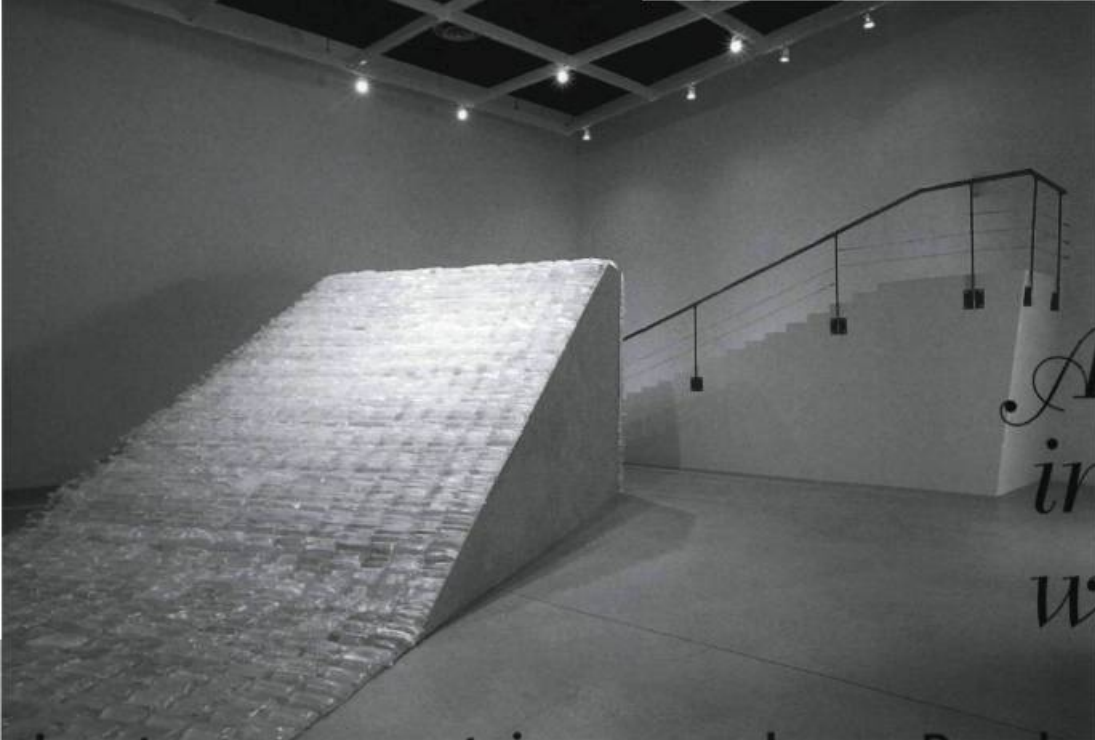
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An artist in the new wilderness

Interventions by Rebecca Belmore

Debbie O'Rourke

It has been a typical avant-garde evening: tutus, uniforms and lots of the nakedness and excoriation of the flesh that performance art is all about: artists pounding salt and washing their hands with it, clipping junk-food to their breasts and navels... Through it all the sophisticates laugh, clap, drink cocktails and look ironic.

But as we await the final performance, ironic detachment dissolves. The piece begins with the announcement: "Dudley George, an unarmed protester, was shot and killed by an Ontario Provincial Police Officer at Ipperwash Provincial Park on September 6, 1995. This officer was recently sentenced to perform 180 hours of community service."

In the dark we hear the sound of military drums, moving into the artist's recorded voice belting out "My Baby Shot Me Down". A stately, red-clad Belmore marches in bearing a sapling tree like a flag. As she lays it gently on a wooden table, some of us immediately feel the weight of that ancient gesture. In places where all important human social functions have not been professionalized, a deceased person is often laid out on such a homely piece of everyday furniture, then cleaned and dressed by relatives and friends for the viewing and the funeral.

Belmore kneels on the table, attacking the sapling with a large hunting-knife while the song persists. She is reckless in the way she walks about on that shaking surface; her gestures as she carves are too often toward her own body. The table trembles in response to the grief and anger palpable in the strokes of the knife that strip the youthful tree of its garment of life: its leaves and branches and still-green, stickily bark.

"My baby shot me down." One of

Belmore's trademarks is her finesse in manipulating overblown emotionality and twisting cliché for her own purposes. Somehow, no one feels like sniggering at Cher's old chestnut, and it is the sense of betrayal that penetrates through this pop ditty. Schools don't teach that at the time of Canada's colonization, commitments were made that avoided a costly American-style Indian war and secured military alliances with the First Nations. Those Native warriors, including American refugees who were the ancestors of many Canadian Chippewa and Mohawks, fended off U.S. invaders in return for guarantees that the Canadian government would guard their title to the small territories that would remain with the original inhabitants as the European tide swept the land...

Rebecca Belmore, *For Dudley*
7A*11D Performance Art Festival,
Symptom Hall, Toronto
August, 1997

A massive steel construction, shaped like a tsunami and apparently composed of tons of water sealed in plastic milk-bags, faces a titanic white staircase. The water, gathered from various points along Lake Ontario, creates a shimmering edifice whose kinetic power threatens to crash through the wall of the lakefront gallery to rejoin the body of water only a hundred yards on the other side. Enchanting and jewel-like as only water can be with life-giving, shimmering transparency, the sacs of fluid contain unsettling evidence of impurity: hues reminiscent of rust and piss streaking through the opaline. A pipe emerging from the mass culminates in a watering water-fountain.

The structure of the staircase is at once

minimal, monolithic and grand: the zigurat meeting the grand Southern mansion. The steps are long, forcing the climber into a stately, limb-stretching dreamer's ascent. It is climaxed by a view through a tiny telescope that permits a narrow glimpse of Lake Ontario outside. The small circle of vision eliminates the context of waterfront and sky and frames a generic view of grey April waves, their rhythmic motions epitomizing all of the world's oceans. Turning back to face the gallery and leaning over the rail like lovers with a view of Niagara Falls, we look down upon the monstrous structure of metal and liquid. Its tainted bulk threatens the drinking fountain as it appears to lunge lakeward. In this installation by Rebecca Belmore, water is presented as the essence of life itself: the packaged, polluted substance that we ingest, making up most of our body mass; and the archetypal substance of our dreams. Its bulk, rising like Hokusai's wave, threatens relief, release or catastrophe: as urgent as a full bladder, as fragile as an eyeball.

The medium of installation is as cool as performance is hot, but the massive formality of *Temple* is as compelling and as kinetic as an artist's body wielding a knife in semi-darkness. *For Dudley* is one of several pieces in her oeuvre that mourn the loss of human life, but Rebecca Belmore sees the land also as a living being, powerful yet vulnerable to violence and betrayal. Despite all efforts to pit human economic survival against ecological concerns, our fates are bound together. The creation myths that underlie cultures are more than metaphor, and beneath all of Belmore's creations lies the perception that Earth and flesh are one.

Rebecca Belmore,
Temple, 1996.
Installation View.
J.S. McLean Gallery,
The Power Plant.
Photo: Cheryl O'Brien.



Rebecca Belmore, *Ayumee-awaatch Oomama-mowan*, (Speaking to Their Mother), 1992. Mount McKay, Fort William First Nation. Photo: Michael Beynon.

The government that killed Dudley George has been busy laying the groundwork for the privatization of Ontario's water supply: an exercise that amounts to selling the bodies of its citizenry.

Belmore turned to performance and installation early in her career, when traditional art forms proved to be inadequate for the task of communicating with and about her people and place of origin. After she left the Ontario College of Art in 1987 and returned to her home town of Thunder Bay, she toured Northwestern Ontario creating improvised galleries in friendship centres in small towns and in reserve communities. The citizenry often didn't understand what she was there to do although they had received correspondence from the gallery. On one reserve she was permitted to set up in their boardroom, but as she sat there for three days only one elderly lady came to see the show.

"That was my first experience with being an exhibiting artist, and it was quite devastating at the time. But it was quite a good experience because I really questioned myself: How do I want to make art? After that point I gave up drawing."

Belmore's early forays into performance art demonstrated humour, political commitment and a talent for getting media attention. Belmore insisted that her work communicate and that it be relevant to the struggles of her people. This is a form of rigor that has been abandoned by many contemporary artists, who assume that an interest in a broader audience is commercially motivated and inevitably results in pandering. Belmore's target audience includes Anishnaabe people from remote communities and those who are, in her words, "innocent of art". It is intriguing that in order to become relevant to this public, the art forms she moved into were those we generally assume to be enjoyed largely within an elite club of peers that is

familiar with contemporary forms and theory. It is instructive that she has achieved accessibility without sacrificing complexity of form or concept.

Installation can be pretentious and stultifying, but it is also a medium that shatters the distance between viewer and viewed. It's not coincidental that ecological artists have embraced this art form, moving it from its history as a cerebral avant-garde exercise to a challenging and sensual embrace of the viewer. In Belmore's practice, performance and construction are intertwined. She sees the viewer as a performer within her installations, something of which one could not avoid being conscious of when making that dreamer's ascent, in *Temple*.

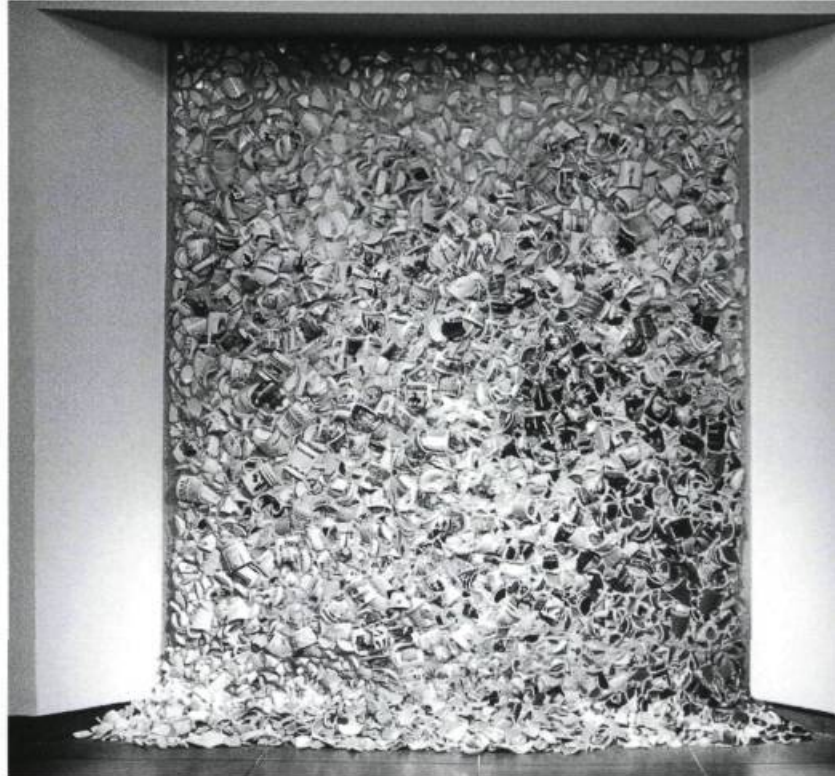
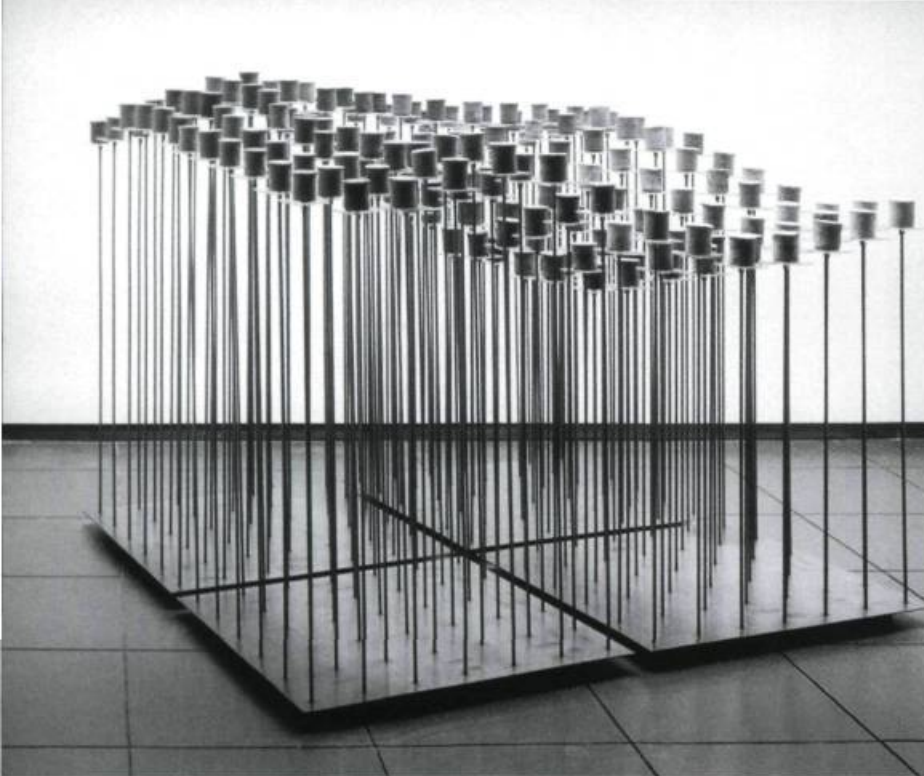
It was during a 1991 residency at the Banff Centre, that Belmore conceived an idea that enabled her both to be an object-creator and to fulfil her ambition to foster a genuine interactivity between artist and community. At her request, Banff carpenter Mimo Maeola supervised the building of a giant wooden megaphone. The piece was named *Ayumee-awaatch Oomama-mowan*, (Speaking to Their Mother). Belmore arranged a gathering of First Nations people from the local area, and invited them to use the megaphone to address the earth directly: "With First Nations people, a lot of the struggle with governments is about land, about resources... So I wanted people to speak directly to this issue as though it is another living thing with which we have a relationship. I was hoping through this whole collective process, through these gatherings, to be rejuvenated. The beauty of the piece is that the enlarged size of the wooden form doesn't make the voice much louder, but it does shoot the voice much further so it finds an echo. That gathering, at Banff, was the most amazing acoustically because I found a very good site. The

voice would echo nine times. The way that it works for the speaker is that emotionally you recognize your own voice coming off the land. When I observed people I would see that they seemed to find this a humbling experience... It's also a piece that looks at protest and tries to encourage First Nations people to see protest as a positive action, as a necessary thing in our struggle to better our lives and to be healthier people... I wanted to say that to speak your own truth is a good thing."

In 1992, Belmore toured the megaphone to ten sites across the country, allowing local organizers to arrange each gathering and choose the location as they saw fit. Sites ranged from the steps of Parliament Hill to a protest action in northern Saskatchewan to peaceful Mount McKay overlooking Lake Superior; from Louis Riel's monument in Winnipeg to the beach of Belmore's home community. The megaphone continues to be delivered to locations that request its presence, but community interaction is an exhausting process. After 1992, Belmore moved on to ways of working that were as colossally contemplative as the megaphone was interactive. She retreated to Sioux Lookout, called Wana-na-wang-ong in the Anishnaabe language.

Though Belmore disappeared from the Toronto scene, she and Wana-na-wang-ong have traveled far. An installation of that name, displayed at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 1994, contained sand and cedar from the shoreline near her home, and featured panels woven of spruce roots and moss gathered in a clearcut near the reserve. *A Blanket For Sarah*, created for a 1994 international exhibition at the Heard Museum in Phoenix Arizona, was constructed of materials gathered from the same devastated area. It was dedicated to a street person who froze to death in Sioux Lookout.

Both pieces are triumphantly successful examples of minimalist art, fulfilling the spiritual promise to which the million-dollar paintings are a mere pretense. Belmore's works smell of the land, and spruce tea that the gallery brewed daily in Vancouver even enabled visitors to drink of *Wana-na-wang-ong*. Both installations were laboriously fabricated by Belmore and her sister Florence, a poet who wrote an evocative text for the catalogue of *Wana-na-wang-ong*. For *A Blanket For Sarah* the sisters, helped by occasional volunteers, wove over 800,000 pine needles through window screen. A seven foot by nine and a half foot field of red-ochre hued needles, it is indeed a demanding example to set before those who would take the test of creating minimalist art: rigorously simple, yet at the same time sensual and highly spiritual.



Belmore continues to work with the land, carrying bits of it about with her to introduce to far away places. The struggle not only to defend the Earth but to understand it or simply to have a place to survive on it has become more dangerous: the machinery of consumption is speeding up and becoming more brutal as it tries to wring the last billions in cash out of the planet it is desertifying. One of its manifestations is the government-sanctioned police violence that threatens all who seriously oppose the status quo, especially First Nations people. More insidious is the remilitarization of the mind (especially in the young male) that has taken place over the past decade.

Belmore confronted this rising violence in a journey/installation she created for an exhibition called *Longing and Belonging, from the Faraway Nearby for Site Santa Fe 1995*, in New Mexico. In preparation for this exhibition, Belmore and her partner Michael Beynon drove from Sioux Lookout to Santa Fe. They took a long route through thirteen states, collecting soil samples and souvenir cups along the way to map the journey. One of the stops was Oklahoma city, where the federal building had been bombed a few months earlier: "The building had been taken down... There was a chain link fence inside of which they were cleaning up the rubble with bulldozers. Basically what was left was just a mound of dirt. While we were there as tourists, hanging out at the fence, there were other people from all over the U.S. who came to witness. They decorated the fence with poems and teddy-bears. People would talk with each other, express their horror... They were shocked at the violence within. When we got to Santa Fe, I took all the soil samples I had collected, formed them in the inside of the cups and sun-dried them, which is how the local people do their abode. There are 168 of

them, which is the number of people who died in the bombing. They were installed under a skylight which is roughly the same shape and size, so there is natural light coming down, and the soil samples are kind of reaching up. I wanted to use the idea of steel and glass, of architecture, then all the beautiful natural colours of the soil. Some people commented that the soil was like us human beings, and our skin colours. It's kind of a universal idea of land and endings. For the second part of the installation, I had an alcove built into the wall to mimic the doors of the museum. I smashed the cups and organized them into different colour schemes. I created a kind of a tile mosaic piece using the beautiful local Santa Fe clay, and installed it directly onto the wall. In Santa Fe the homes have a lot of tile, which is where I got the idea. The imagery on the cups is of flowers, always the state flower; a lot of Native American imagery; some cowboy and Wild West imagery — this nostalgic, kind of kitsch history; lots of animals, bears, nature. I was taking the idea of the cup as symbolic of consuming, a very universal tool. When I saw this kind of imagery on the cups I thought it was very interesting because, especially with the images of Native American people... those things have been fully consumed and the question is are they totally conquered, are they totally owned?"

Belmore named the Santa Fe piece *New Wilderness*. "The new wilderness that we live in now is, of course, this violence within our own fence, within our own territories." Belmore's creations exist as gateways more than events or objects: the real world penetrates the gallery, through her body and her inventions. As William Burroughs would say, she shows us what is at the end of that long newspaper spoon. 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. ■

Rebecca Belmore, *Temple*, from *Liaisons*.
The Power Plant, Toronto
April 1996

Rebecca Belmore,
New Wilderness.
Photo: Robert Keziere.

Rebecca Belmore,
New Wilderness. Detail.
Photo: Robert Keziere.

L'auteure commente le travail de Rebecca Belmore, notamment sa participation au Performance Art Festival et son exposition à la galerie Power Plant de Toronto. Intitulée *For Dudley*, la performance, tenue l'été dernier, rappelait la mort de George Dudley survenue lors d'une manifestation en septembre 1995 au Parc Ipperwash. Quant à l'œuvre présentée à Power Plant, elle montrait une imposante construction en acier où était empilée une multitude de sacs de plastique remplis d'eau, et posée à proximité d'un immense escalier blanc. Prélevée en divers points du Lac Ontario, l'eau formait une structure chatoyante qui semblait vouloir se rompre à tout moment pour aller rejoindre celle du lac situé à quelques mètres de la galerie. L'eau, chez Belmore représente l'essence même de la vie.

Si *For Dudley* fait partie des nombreuses œuvres de l'artiste déplorant la perte de la vie humaine, Rebecca Belmore voit aussi la nature comme une entité vivante et vulnérable. Pour elle, la Terre et la chair ne font qu'un, tout comme la performance et l'œuvre construite sont indissociables. Belmore envisage le spectateur comme un intervenant actif dans ses installations et ses interventions qui, empreintes d'un certain humour, n'en sont pas moins fortement engagées sur les plans politique et social, enracinées qu'elles sont dans la pensée et les luttes autochtones. Ses créations — présentées dans le milieu de l'art ou sur des sites extérieurs comme à Santa Fe —, se veulent davantage des "lieux de passage" que de simples événements ou objets : à travers son corps et les gestes qu'elle pose, ce sont les enjeux du monde actuel qui se donnent à voir dans l'espace de la galerie.