



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

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To encounter is to interpret. The encounter in itself creates particular conditions for interpretation. It happens in time and in place, and time and place interacts with how we interpret. An encounter with an artwork is, as Griselda Pollock (2006) 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'. Interpreting an art work involves acts of decoding, undoing, seeking connections, positioning it within representational possibilities and possibilities of representation and the history of such possibilities, identifying similarities or differences in relation to and with other objects on a conscious or unconscious level, and oftentimes from a place of difference (Bourdieu, 1993).

In the first part of this paper I consider these ideas through a close and critical engagement with the work and work practices of the Canadian First Nations artist, Rebecca Belmore. I focus in particular on a piece that she performed on the street in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada, in the summer of 2002, and which featured in the mid-career retrospective exhibition of her work at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the summer of 2008. Encountering this work, titled *Vigil*, in a gallery space rather than on the street, and six years after it was first performed raises important questions about how we interpret over time and in and out of place. And, it makes visible how practices of interpretation arise not alone from the particularity of the work itself, but also in relation to how, when, and where it is encountered by whom, and for what purpose. I engage in this critical interpretative analysis in an attempt to make visible the complexities of engaging with creative works over time, and by extension outcomes and products of arts-research, and following that, I consider what a close, critical and attentive analysis and interpretation of an art work and art practice offers 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.

In the second part of the paper, I consider if a member of the academy in his or her capacity as an arts-researcher could do what Belmore did in, and with *Vigil*. Under the auspices of academic freedom, I argue, 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 and practice be understood, made sense of, ranked, and evaluated in the academic world? How might it be perceived within his or her own 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? But, is it more than a question of interpretation. Rather, is it an issue of identification, alignment, group membership and professional practice? I explore these issues and questions through Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) theory of field (*champ*). In conclusion, I claim that 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. I draw on Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler's (2006: 6) argument that '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'. Drawing on the work of Kathleen Lynch (2006), I extend this argument from the perspective that there is widespread public trust that academics will undertake research and teach for the public good. As Lynch (2006: 11) 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'. Given that 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, I argue that 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.