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In Search of Hózhó: Notes on Performance and Performance Art

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IN SEARCH OF HÓZHÓ

Notes on Performance and Performance Art

Aboriginal performance art is the high-heeled, steel-toed moccasin of the telegraph; a series of mountain passes known for extreme weather and dangerous curves. Here, First Nations artists hybridize the telegraph, distilling the information into communal hyper-parable, the issues couched in metaphor or served raw. —Archer Pechawis¹

By Matthew Ryan Smith

ARTIST REBECCA BELMORE (Ojibwe) was visiting a friend's house in Lethbridge, Alberta, and picked up a book titled *1492 and All That: Making a Garden Out of a Wilderness* by Ramsay Cook, which tells the story of a Mi'kmaq man taken captive by French settlers. The settlers returned to France with the man and created an enclosure they described as a wilderness garden. In effect, the wilderness garden was little more than a human zoo masquerading under a different name.

The man was forced to hunt a deer with a bow and arrow, skin it, cook it, and then eat it. The French audience watched him for a long time, clearly enthralled with what they were seeing. According to the Mi'kmaq people, the hunter later squatted down and excreted in plain sight of his captors. Doing so was an act of retribution, and presumably many of the onlookers could sense the hunter's displeasure in the air. For Belmore, the event not only represents one of the first international performances by an Indigenous person, but it's also a dissident gesture of anticolonial resistance.²

The Unbroken Line

FOLLOWING 1492, it became common practice for settler-colonialists to capture and enslave Indigenous peoples. Some captives were put to work as guides or interpreters, while others were transported to Europe to perform for heads of state. In doing so, they would become instruments of political leverage, a means of garnering resources and support for the expansion of empire.³ For example, Christopher Columbus enslaved Arawak people from the Bahamas and transported them to Spain for proof that resource-rich lands had been “discovered,” which helped secure ships and capital from the Crown. In the mid-19th century, once the settler-colonial prophecy of Manifest Destiny pushed West through the Plains and into the Pacific, artist George Catlin paraded his paintings and objects from Plains peoples throughout Europe as part of his Indian Gallery. Under the guise that these materials and people were vanishing, the successful tour essentially performed Indianness to European audiences hungry for last glimpses of tribal wonders and

ephemera. “I have, for many years past,” writes Catlin, “contemplated the noble races of red men who are now spread over these trackless forests and boundless prairies, melting away at the approach of civilization.”⁴ Yet, perhaps the most famous example of these early performative gestures is Chief Sitting Bull's participation in William Cody's Buffalo Bill's Wild West expositions. At most of these performances, Sitting Bull circled the arena on horseback, saluted the crowd, and charged audiences for his autograph and/or his photograph. In 1883, the wild west show's organizers celebrated the completion of the Northern Pacific Railway, and efforts to sing its praises were candidly expressed during performances. In response to the displacement and maltreatment of Indigenous peoples for the sake of the railroad, Sitting Bull is alleged to have cursed his audience in the Lakota language.⁵ Telling off a vast majority of non-Indigenous audiences not only draws a line to the actions of the Mi'kmaq man, but also to a lengthy tradition of utilizing performance to refute and refuse the apparatuses of colonialism.



Terrance Houle (Kainai-Saulteaux), *Friend of Foe #7: iisistsikóowa (he is tired)*, 2014, performance at the 7a¹11d Festival Toronto. Photo: Henry Chan. Image courtesy of the artist.

On the other hand, to argue that performance or performative gestures occurred after 1492 and evolved into the expanded field of contemporary Live Art seems doomed to failure. To do so would mean that the history of performance by Indigenous peoples is merely 400 years old, while conceding that it is a discursive offshoot of European colonialism. For curator and artist Greg A. Hill (Mohawk), “there is an unbroken line of performance going back to time immemorial that includes ritual, dance, oratory, storytelling, dream interpretation, and ceremonial protocols.”⁶ In a similar line of flight, Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteaux) affirms that “performance is something we've always done as Native Americans. It's storytelling. It's a continuum of what we've been doing for hundreds of years.”⁷ Performance by Indigenous peoples and artists is

best understood outside the vacuum of settler-colonialism, since to bestow European colonialism with setting up the conditions for performance is not only misleading but affords it too much power over Indigenous cultural history. Rather, each performance carries a trace—consciously or unconsciously identifiable—of those who came before, and speaks to a cosmology of contexts, including gender, race, aesthetics, sexuality, or politics, that informed each performance.⁸ This may also embody the transmission of elemental principles: Indigenous knowledge, language, family lineage, tribal narrative, spirituality, and storytelling.⁹ Though we may not consider it as such, performance is an archive of events and experiences, a vessel of knowledge that connects the performer to his or her cultural history. In turn, the physical body of

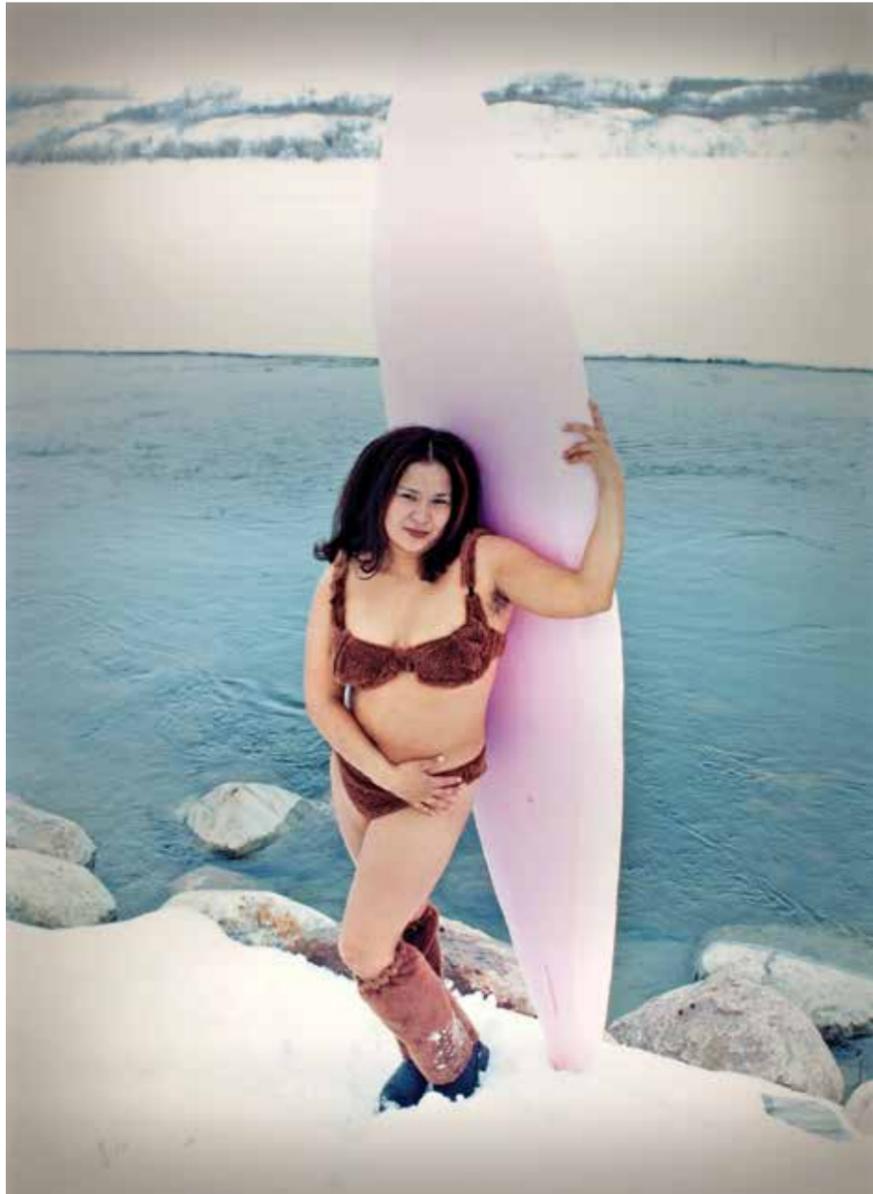
the performer functions as a repository of existence and generates meaning by articulating the act of living. *Every performance is a performance of a previous performance.* Surely this is the unbroken line.

In an expanded field, performance now symbolizes a breadth of practices and aesthetics that fall under the updated term *Live Art*. Contemporary live art is often defined by its ephemerality, by its willingness to disappear completely and forever. To this end, it is a “non-reproductive”¹⁰ form of cultural expression that is actualized by the physical body while—depending on whom you talk to—necessitating the company of an audience.

More commonly, performance exists through material documentation taking the form of video, film, photography, and soon perhaps, virtual

1. Archer Pechawis, “New Traditions: Post-Oka Aboriginal Performance Art in Vancouver,” *INDIANacts: Aboriginal Performance Art*, accessed November 24, 2016, web.
2. Rebecca Belmore, “Making a Garden Out of a Wilderness,” in *Action and Agency: Advancing the Dialogue on Native Performing Art*, ed. Nancy J. Blomberg (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2010), 16–17.
3. Greg A. Hill, “Caught... (red-handed),” in *Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer*, ed. Josée Drouin-Brisebois (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2008), 148.
4. Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 184.
5. Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (Canada: HarperCollins, 1991), 106.

6. Hill, “Caught... (red-handed),” 146.
7. Lori Blondeau in discussion with the author, November 24, 2016.
8. Elin Diamond, “Introduction,” in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.
9. Sue McKemmish, Livia Iacovino, Lynette Russell, and Melissa Castan, “Editors' Introduction to Keeping Cultures Alive: Archives and Indigenous Human Rights,” *Archival Science* 12, no. 2 (June 2012), 93–111.
10. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 148.



Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteaux), *Lonely Surfer Squaw*, 1997, performance at the South Saskatchewan River. Photo: Bradlee LaRoque. Image courtesy of the artist.

reality. But what is particularly attractive about performance is its autonomy from capitalist forms of mass (re) production—technological, economical, and linguistic.¹¹ Hence, to write about performance is to always-already write about invisible histories, to imagine ghosts. For marginalized performers, the medium is a volatile one since it

can frame an already underrepresented community within a matrix of its inevitable vanishing.¹²

Philosophies of power are instrumental in how performance is hypothesized. While the scrutiny of “performance” vs. “performativity” in recent scholarly discourse on gender

and sexuality continue, particularly through the writings of Judith Butler, the concept of performing Indigeneity has also become a productive tool in examining how Indigenous individuals and communities nurture subjectivities and identities “through performance and performative acts in intercultural spaces.”¹³ Cultural identity can be strengthened through performance in public spaces and is essential for underrepresented or marginalized Others to expand their visibility while reclaiming the politics of their representation.¹⁴ As a potential “site of opposition,”¹⁵ to use bell hook’s phraseology, performance lends itself as a powerful mode of political critique and resistance to institutionalized forms of racism. Performance is the everyday made epic. It can serve as a site to disturb, to decolonize, to talk out, and to talk back.¹⁶

In performance, the question of audience is omnipresent. The relationship between audience and performer is often prefaced by bodily movement, voice, and environment; nevertheless, this reading severely limits the interconnectedness that exists between the performer and the audience when inhabiting the same space. In her book, *The Transmission of Affect*, Theresa Brennan contends that affect can be thought of as “emotions” or “energies” quite literally shared between individuals or groups that share physical space. In the words of Brennan:

*The transmission of affect ... is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual.*¹⁷

Our moods, our feelings, and our thoughts have the capacity to affect and transform the condition of others. Here Brennan is speaking specifically to hormones and other chemical messengers that circulate through the air and produce physiological responses that may trigger certain feelings, both short and long term. The deep consequence of her study is that our emotions and energies are not as independent as they would first appear, and thus our proximity to other people—to our friends, family, and even strangers—is far closer than we could have imagined. The notion of the physically autonomous body is in some ways a communal body. The implications for performance are tremendous. In Brennan’s provisos, the audience can sustain a visual, emotional, and now physiological affinity to the performer in some capacity. The activation of the audience is not wholly dependent upon the actions of the performer but also the transmission of their affects; that by setting the tone or

the mood of a performance might now involve the artist’s critical introspection of the types of affects to be transmitted to the audience. Perhaps the fourth wall has always been a myth.

The expression of emotion is political for many Indigenous performers. Stereotypes of being stoic or noble persist into the present day. Emotional is what Indigenous people are not supposed to be. For artist Shelley Niro (Mohawk), this form of pigeonholing of Native people is endemic: “You have this idea already in your head—a simply dressed person with a kind of sad look on their face—sort of a poster child. I get so sick of that.”¹⁸ Deliberate and designed expressions of emotion function as powerful marks of resistance that recover Indigenous subjectivities and identities. To this end, emotion has become a cynosure for critical examination by performance artists including, but not limited to, Santee Smith (Mohawk), Terrance Houle (Kainai-Saulteaux), Daina Ashbee (Cree-Métis),

and Bently Spang (Northern Cheyenne).

The manipulation of emotion through performative gestures and subject matter is a different but interrelated aspect of performance’s pedagogical potential—intense emotion, as a “shock to thought,” does not reveal truth but rather aids in the stimulation of critical inquiry and deep introspection.¹⁹ There is value in intense emotion. It can kindle a fire that sustains longer periods of study and contemplation. It helps to understand things beyond their surface.

In this context, to draw comparisons between performance art and the Navajo concept of *hózhó* may prove productive. In Navajo, the term signifies one’s harmonious balance with the world, which is why *hózhó* often translates to “beauty” in the English language. “*Hózhó* expresses the intellectual notion of order,” explains Gary Witherspoon, a professor and scholar of Navajo studies, “the emotional state of happiness, the physical state of health, the moral



Adrian Stimson (Siksika), 2013, performance as Buffalo Boy in *Blood Memoirs: Exploring Individuality, Memory, and Culture* at the Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth, Minnesota. Photo: Sharon Mollerus (CC BY 2.0).

11. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 149.

12. Tavia Nyong’o, “Out of the Archive: Performing Minority Embodiment,” *Action and Agency: Advancing the Dialogue on Native Performing Art*, ed. Nancy J. Blomberg (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2010), 150–151.

13. Cecilia Josephine Aragón, “Bently Spang: On the Future of Indigenous Performance Art,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, issue 4 (September 2015), 346.

14. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 7.

15. Lynne Bell and Lori Blondeau, “High-Tech Storytellers, Unsettling Acts, Decolonizing Pedagogies,” *INDIANacts: Aboriginal Performance Art*, accessed December 6, 2016, web.

16. Ibid.

17. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.

18. “Shelley Niro: Mohawks In Beehives + Other Work,” *Mercer Union*, accessed November 29, 2016, web.

19. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11.

condition of good, and the aesthetic dimension of harmony.”²⁰ Conversely, notions of order, harmony, and balance can only be achieved in the negotiation between philosophical opposites—anger and calm, frustration and satisfaction, sadness and happiness. This is the space where hózhó exists; only then can a sense of beauty be actualized. Hence, when Rebecca Belmore pronounces, “I try to make things beautiful or at least visually attractive,”²¹ and Adrian Stimson (Siksika) states, “I’m always looking for the beauty,”²² they speak obliquely about hózhó.

In Search of Hózhó

AT SUNSET on October 1, 2016, Rebecca Belmore started her durational performance in Walker Court at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) as part of the city’s annual, all-night art exposition, Nuit Blanche. Curiously titled *New Project*, the performance opened the AGO’s live performance series and was programmed to coincide with



Rebecca Belmore (Ojibwe), *New Project*, 2016, performance at Nuit Blanche, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo: Patar Knight (CC BY 4.0).

the institution’s exhibition, *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971–1989*, which explored one of the city’s most extraordinary periods of cultural production. Designed by architect Frank Gehry, Walker Court is one of the main gathering spaces of the AGO and serves as a kind of fishbowl for audiences positioned on the ground floor and the level above. Walker Court is also the space where Saulteaux painter Robert Houle’s noted work, *Seven Grandfathers* (2014), is installed, a constellation of ceremonial drums simultaneously paying homage to the artist’s Saulteaux heritage while defining the institution’s space. Both Houle’s and Belmore’s work respond to German-born artist Lothar Baumgarten, who in 1984, inaccurately inscribed the names of eight Indigenous nations from Ontario on the walls of the court. As the signage out front of Belmore’s performance make clear, she is intent on reclaiming Walker Court as an Indigenous space, and by doing so she is performing the power of recovery

and renewal. Calmly, deliberately, Belmore works handfuls of ochre-colored clay dug from the Red River Valley in Manitoba, and affixes it liberally to the tiled marble floor of the court. Written words such as *LAND*, *BREATH*, and *WATER* slowly appear.

“We’re wealthy with water,”

Belmore once remarked during an interview, “Maybe it’s more valuable than the oil we’re pulling out of the ground.”²³ *New Project* riffs on the old familiar term, *pipeline project*—witnessed in media outlets and government policy—to unhinge it, to make a case for water. At times, Belmore sits among the clay; at other times she stands to contemplate its appearance from above. The performance unfolds over many hours and is finally completed during the early hours of the morning. The result is a vast clay painting difficult to separate politically from concurrent Dakota Access Pipeline protests in Standing Rock. Both the performance and the protest are troubled by water, for water is medicine and the foundation of life itself. While the performance played out many miles away from Standing Rock, Belmore’s animated Red River Valley clay is a coded signifier of solidarity.

On Saturday, October 22 from 11:00 am to 5:00 pm, participants form a line outside a small art gallery housed in a Toronto-based university. The gallery space features a small ladder and a bunk bed covered in white sheets. An assistant seated at a desk asks individuals in line if they are here to see Adrian Stimson, and if they reply “yes” they are handed a clipboard and a release form. The release stipulates terms of agreement surrounding the documentation of the participant’s photographic portrait. In return, they are compensated by the artist to obtain “the right to say that ‘I have been blown by Adrian Stimson’ (Official certification, all others are just rumours).”

The mise en scène has all the flavor of a doctor’s office, especially when Stimson flings a door open and inquires, “You here to see me? Come right this

way.” A charming grin crosses his face.²⁴ The artist leads participants into the bottom bunk of the bed, asks them to lie down on their back, and instructs them to pull a white sheet up to their neck to give semblance of their nakedness. Stimson then climbs onto the top bunk, picks up his camera, and focuses it on the participant’s face below. There’s some pillow talk, too. He questions participants about the best orgasm they ever had, and then follows this up by asking them to consider Canada’s 150-year history of confederation before inviting them to make their best orgasm face. This almost violent juxtaposition is startling for some and hilarious for others.

After all is said and done, Stimson leads each participant to a corner of the room to an installation of the other portrait photographs captured that day, which are cycled and projected onto a white wall. On the edges of the projection rest large blocks of red to apparently mimic the aesthetic framework of the Canadian flag.

“In 2017,” reads a poster accompanying the work, “Canada will mark the 150th anniversary of its continued invasion of Indigenous lands.” It would appear that Stimson poses the loaded question: What exactly is Canada celebrating? The durational performance, *150 Blows*, part of the 11th annual 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, finds Stimson symbolically and photographically “blowing” 150 Canadians as a feat of pleasure, sacrifice, and political resistance.²⁵ By design, he executes an unambiguous sexualization of the events surrounding Canadian confederation—which he titles *cumfederation*—to delegitimize and usurp the romanticization of uniting the colonies of Canada under a single dominion on July 1, 1867. The trickster title plays on the double-edged meaning of the word “blow” to intimate both oral sex and a physical strike. Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq) points out that settler-colonialism is realized through government policy but also on



Daina Ashbee (Cree-Métis), *Unrelated*, 2014, dance performed by Areli Moran and Daina Ashbee. Photo: Daina Ashbee. Image courtesy of the artist.

and through the physical body, given that blood quantum directly leads to economic structures that further marginalize Indigenous peoples.²⁶ As such, *150 Blows* insinuates an evocative counter-narrative to Canada’s 150th anniversary while emphasizing that the residue of 150 years of integrated settler-colonialism are still unfolding and remain utterly unresolved for many Indigenous people in Canada. These are the stories, among others, that will fall silent when red and white fireworks explode in the sky.

Closing

PERHAPS MORE THAN ANY OTHER, the most significant Indigenous cultural practice that bears weight on present-day performance is the rich tradition of storytelling. The poetics of performance make clear that it is not only the story that matters but also the way in which the story is told. Precontact storytelling protocols were mostly executed through body and voice rather than written language. As follows, the inherent dramaturgy behind storytelling is precisely why Indigenous raconteurs can be considered the first

performance artists.²⁷ In the past, as in the present, storytelling is immersed in theories of reciprocity, community engagement, entertainment, collective memory, emotion, healing, and often moral virtue—to teach one to be good and just. The exchange of a particular story onto (and consequently into) someone else represents a profound act of exchange, of giving and absorbing vicissitudes of meaning. Those critical pedagogies are entrenched in the theory that performance is storytelling (and vice versa); that the two cannot be divorced from one another for the reason that their symbolic relationship to resistance is so markedly intertwined. For Dr. Carla Taunton, “performance art is similar to the process of storytelling, as they both offer an occasion to generate discussion and cohesion within a group of people, while also expressing acts of social and cultural resistance.”²⁸ It should come as little surprise, then, that when James Luna (Luiseño) unapologetically asserts, “I’m here to teach you,”²⁹ he not only follows in the practice of Indigenous storytelling, but he also enacts critical pedagogies for the audience about the artist, about themselves, and about community.

20. Gary Witherspoon, “Holism in Navajo Language and Culture,” in *Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry in Navajo and Western Art and Cosmology*, ed. Gary Witherspoon and Glen Peterson (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1995), 15.

21. Rebecca Belmore, interview by Tom Power, “Q with Tom Power: Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore on beauty and horror,” *CBC Radio-Canada*, May 22, 2014, web.

22. Lynne Bell, “Adrian Stimson: Buffalo Boy at Burning Man,” *Canadian Art* (June 1, 2007), web: 44–48.

23. Robert Enright, “The Poetics of History: An Interview with Rebecca Belmore,” *Border Crossings* 95 (August 2005), web.

24. Adrian Stimson, “150 Blows,” *7a*11d*, accessed December 1, 2016, web.

25. Adrian Stimson, “150 Blows,” artist statement, 2016.

26. cheyenne turions, “Decolonization, Reconciliation, and the Extra-Rational Potential of the Arts,” *ArtsEverywhere* (March 23, 2016), web.

27. Bob Joseph, “11 Things You Should Know About Aboriginal Oral Traditions,” *Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.* (November 5, 2014), web.

28. Carla Taunton, “Lori Blondeau: High-Tech Storytelling for Social Change” (master’s thesis, Carleton University, 2006), 43.

29. Kenneth R. Fletcher, “James Luna,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (April 2008), web.