

BREAKING PROTOCOL

MARIA HUPFIELD

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WANDA NANIBUSH

THE SOUND OF THE
COLOUR FIELD:
ON REBECCA BELMORE

In April 2022, Rebecca Belmore and I traveled to Venice, Italy, to prepare for an original performance marking two occasions: aabaakwad 2022—an international gathering of Indigenous artists, curators, and writers I started in 2018—and Belmore’s return to the Venice Biennale after representing Canada in 2005.

The site I had procured was a beautiful deconsecrated ninth-century church in Campo San Lorenzo that became a contemporary arts venue in 2019 called Ocean Space, one of aabaakwad’s collaborators. Belmore had an inspired idea already brewing when we talked at her opening in New York at the Whitney Biennial a few days before. She wanted to use multiple colored fabrics to create an abstract image, a color field painting, like a painter would use oils. But one thing that can never be produced in a painting that can in a performance is sound. The main action of the work would be the ripping of one thousand yards of fabric—enough to “paint” the courtyard from the steps of the church to the water well in the center. The strips of material were laid out in color blocks—reds, oranges, blues, greens, and whites moving from blood to sunsets to skies, earth and water, gradually revealing a final abstract landscape. Sixteen artists in aabaakwad stood in the courtyard tearing the fabric for forty-five minutes, the noise inspiring the work’s title, *The Sound of the Colour Field*.¹ I must digress at this point to discuss the space. Belmore is a master at drawing out deep meaning from the spaces her work occupies and engages.

The church of San Lorenzo is notable as the resting place of Venetian explorer Marco Polo. For centuries it has been admired as a picturesque site of worship for Roman Catholics, as well as a home for Benedictine monks. For many Indigenous people, the church signifies and memorializes the traumatic history of the violent Christianization of over one hundred fifty

¹ Matti Aikio, Tony Albert, Mosab Alnomire, Paschal Berry, Daniel Browning, Dayna Danger, Jeremy Dutcher, Harald Gaski, Brett Graham, Gunvor Guttorm, Greg Hill, Ursula Johnson, Michelle LaVallee, Rod Nanibush, Sage Paul, Rachael Rekana, and aqui Thami.

years of ~~Indian~~² Residential schools (IRS).³ A great global reckoning has begun where the crimes against our children over so many generations are finally being unearthed; the apologies keep coming, most recently from Pope Francis.⁴ Sitting on the steps of Campo San Lorenzo, Belmore and I spoke about the recent actions to memorialize and mourn the Indigenous children who were being found in mass and unmarked graves on IRS grounds across Canada. We both thought of the women in our families, their strength and pain.

As we looked at the square, which is bordered by a canal, we also spoke about Belmore's 2005 work *Fountain*, a sixteen-foot wall of water onto which a video is projected. The video has water turn into blood and blood into water. *Fountain* was a prescient work that spoke to water as a source of a future war, but also as a site of responsibility and resistance. In the intervening years since she made that work, her vision has become clear; many activist movements such as Idle No More and Standing Rock, to name only two, have similarly made water protection central to their work.

The steps in front of the desacralized church became the starting point of her performance and color choices.

On April 23 at 7 pm, the sky opened up in a soft, cold rain, magically mirroring what I and maybe a hundred other Indigenous artists and three hundred guests at the Venice Biennale were feeling. I let tears slide down my cheeks because they were indistinguishable from the rain while holding/hugging two friends in comfort and warmth. The performance hit me hard right away (even though I knew what was coming). The sight of sixteen bodies ripping red

² I strikethrough the word ~~Indian~~ because it is in the actual name for the schools but still a misnomer—the strike-through marks the conundrum of history and language.

³ To learn more about IRS and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see: <https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada>.

⁴ Read the Pope's full apology for the Catholic Church's role in IRS here: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/read-the-full-text-of-pope-francis-speech-and-apology-1.6001384>.

fabric in front of the church made me think of the rivers of blood that have flowed from these places of worship and how they stole so many childhoods. I thought of my mother attending one of these prisons masquerading as Christian benevolence and improvement. It was the amplified sound of tearing nylon fabric that brought me simultaneously into a feeling of the power of creation alongside grief. Belmore chose to start the performance with red fabric to evoke blood, but also red power and sunsets as the progression of colors shifted into orange. Beauty with grief is Belmore's trademark. As her workers moved to new colors and onto the square each of them started to individualize their motions, and eventually they started working together. Each body became part of a choreography with Belmore as the master choreographer directing both their movements and the building of the image through color. In the final action they surrounded the well where Belmore joined them in what felt like a prayer to the water. The deep love we have for water and land has only ever been strengthened by the violence that has tried to rip it from us.

The Sound of the Colour Field in the year 2022 was a visualization of the turmoil, trauma, and daily work we are doing on behalf of our lost and murdered children and the first mother we must protect.

As the square emptied, I marveled at the beauty of the painting Belmore had produced from strips of nylon. In a space like the Venice Biennale, the critique was also clear—Belmore drew upon human fragility, vulnerability, and emotion to create her own color field, dismissing the modernist and ethnocentric art world on display at the biennale.





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