

**My Breath, My Gravity:  
My Anishinabe Indexical Opens, Pops and Riffs**

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1998

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## **Abstract**

### **My Breath My Gravity: My Anishinabe Indexical Opens, Pops and Riffs**

The paintings in this installation are presented in four distinct groupings. Five large works are hung low on the wall; a stack of paintings on paper are placed on a table as a hands-on viewer friendly archive; smaller works on canvas are stored in a small structure that suggests both a cedar house and a storage rack; and lastly three small works on canvas lean against the wall near the cedar house. In these works I explore how First Nations subjectivity can inhabit painting as an index of my presence inscribed through repetitive vertical lines I call “opens,” “pops,” and “riffs.” For me, vertical lines, repeating gesture and luminous colour contrasts indicate First Nations presence, memory and connections to the greater social world.

**Keywords:** First Nations; painting; installation; the index; memory

I dedicate this creative project  
to my partner of the past 21 years  
Mark Richardson.

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## **Chapter 1. Artist's Statement:**

### ***My Breath, My Gravity: My Anishinabe Indexical Opens, Pops and Riffs***

#### **The Paintings and Their Process**

In the series there are five 5 x 6 foot oil paintings on canvas, ten 18 x 24" acrylic and oil canvases, and 30 gouache and acrylic paintings on white and grey paper presented as three forms of interactive installation. The paintings are installed on the gallery's walls, stored within a small stylized cedar house or piled upon a studio work table. The vertical stripe is a structural motif to explore how paint can be applied using different objects and brushes in varying colour combinations and sequences. The methods of applying paint are broken down into two groups: the gouache/acrylic paintings use strips of painted wood, plywood and Plexiglas to make repetitions of mono prints upon the paper's surface, an index of my body's gravity and the pressure I exert. The acrylic/oil on canvas works juxtapose masked out flatly painted stripes with broken imperfect drags of paint, an index of my breath: I drag the brush down breathing slowly.

#### **Why the Stripe?**

Much of my work comes from my personal history and experience of being a First Nations woman living in an urban context. In representing this life, I try not to reveal every detail or present the latest version of a "Native American experience." The stripe was a method to pursue my interest and involvement in studio work, to explore colour, invent new ways of applying paint and try hard-edge painting without flagging a First Nations theme.

Initially, the vertical stripe was an appropriation of 60s Minimalism. In this I am drawn in agreement to Robert Morris' rebuttal of the transcendental verticality within Formalist painting. His rejection of metaphor, narrative, and valuable artifact<sup>1</sup> via minimal structure and expression I translate into the vertical stripes and lines that foreground process and imperfection. For me, the vertical line becomes a source of freedom from representing a "First Nations" narrative, where the gesture is minimized to its sparsest delineation. This is me, this is my breath influencing the quality of my mark making. Imprints on paper and drags of paint on canvas speak simply as presence. My work is not Frank Stella's stripes where he casually declaims: "What you see is what you see." Instead, my Anishinabe Kwe existence is alive within each mark to state: I exist on this earth and come from my ancestors.

I felt a need to re-name the stripe in order to claim it and re-contextualize it as my own. As the work progressed I began to see "pops," "opens," and "riffs" of colour. Sharper stripes using masking tape and vertical motions of downward drags became clearer and more pronounced. Repetitions of vertical drags become a recorder of controlled and uncontrolled steadiness of my hand, allowing both to exist as assured and imperfect. Within the play between masked-out painting and free-hand drags, presence resounds as "opens."

Within "opens" my presence takes precedence over trying to perfect a hard-edged technique. The seepage of paint beneath masking tape is left uncorrected. Free-hand drags wobble and stutter down the canvas making the masked area's lack of crispness less noticeable, almost camouflaged. Ultimately what I want to be visible is the methods and process of their making as coming from my body. The "Open" can be hard or soft-edged, handmade or masked-out, flat or brushy just as long as there is presence and life within it.

The contrasts between the stripes often pulse and pop, cutting into one's vision. As one's attention scans the surface of the painting, some contrasts and combinations become more vivid than others. Combinations of cool and warm hues such as green

<sup>1</sup> "1965: Judd, Morris and Minimalism," *Art Since 1900: 1945 To The Present Vol. 2*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 536.

and red, blue and orange, yellow and blue black seem to pop out from the surface of the canvas, and are named just that, “Pops.”

My choices of colour come from varied sources and influences. Within the gouache paintings on grey paper, the colour choices come directly from a gouache paint set. For both small and large canvases, the palette origins are inspired by memories from childhood of 70s Tupperware, a yellow Sports Walkman, a turquoise ring, a Caucasian flesh tone crayon, a public school gym uniform of maroon and ochre, my father’s brown wool sweater, masking tape green, pumpkin orange, Barbie doll pink and a deep Indian red pencil crayon. Furthermore, underlying all these influences is the impression made on me at a young age by the vibrant totemic animal paintings by Norval Morrisseau<sup>2</sup>. Although in mentioning these sources I don’t want to present a personal narrative, colour still plays an important role in anchoring my memories of the past. My memories of being raised in a non-Native neighborhood in East Toronto apart from my birth community in northern Ontario can still be represented purely through colour. The highly saturated colours I employ vibrate and bounce off each other much like memory and emotion. The conflicting colour combinations or “riffs,” as I call them, work with and against each other. Conceptually they represent conflict between memory and a declaration of being - a declaration of being “Nish” or Anishinabe within the present. While I acknowledge these colours as having come from aspects of mainstream material culture, I still assert they are simultaneously Anishinabe in presence and expression.

## **The Installation**

The 5 x 6’ works are installed approximately one foot off the floor on the gallery walls, allowing a more human scaled presentation. The viewer is able to see the progression of how the work was painted, beginning with its brushy stripes, then to its masked out flat stripes and finishing with layers of free-hand lines over top. Keeping the

<sup>2</sup> Norval Morrisseau, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, Toronto; (New York: Methuen, 1979). Norval Morrisseau was an Ojibway painter of the Woodland School depicting animals, Thunderbirds and people in a stylized highly colourful manner. His paintings were inspired by Ojibway pictographs, the Midewin Grand Medicine Society and stained glass-windows.

process of the work's creation visible, I am keeping my actions and decision making visible. First Nations presence resonates as contrasting "pops" of colour beside free-hand drags of blue "opens" to entice and confront one's vision within the luminous multiple layers of paint.

In the second installation, 30 gouache and acrylic paintings on paper lie on a studio work-table as a tactile hands-on archive. The viewer can handle and shift the work around on the table in order to experience the work. When leafing through the paintings, a progression and development is evident: the archive as a source of ideas translated into the large finished canvases. The casual-looking pile of work displayed on the studio table extends the active work-oriented environment into the exhibition gallery space and into the hands of the viewer.

In the third part of the installation, a cedar house storing smaller paintings builds upon my thinking about the work of R.H. Quaytman. A conceptual painter based in New York City, her abstract works are created in repetitious series she calls "chapters." Her work critiques the cultural, societal and architectural positioning of contemporary painting, as she presents it in a series of site-specific storage units inside the gallery's exhibition and storage space. Her units often mimic the shelving of the gallery itself, such that her paintings become part of the gallery's organizational make-up. She further cleverly invites the viewer to take her paintings out of the unit and hang them on available hooks on the gallery's wall. I too wanted to include this type of interaction with my work as a method of recognition of place and self-awareness for the viewer. Dissimilar to Quaytman, my cedar house exists as a self-standing structure visibly occupying space within the gallery. As a structural reminder of the Longhouse of the Coast Salish in the Lower Mainland, the house can also represent an East Van bungalow, an architectural model, or a house in mid-construction. By placing my work within the cedar house I am metaphorically placing my work within the Coast Salish territory and the greater indigenous network of the Northwest coast's cultural expression and history. It is a transitional space to organize and shelter my work in the future, and a space that invites the viewer to place a painting upon its roof, acknowledging they too walk upon a territory and use this network. How is our presence and experience framed, sheltered or overshadowing within the established history, culture and economy of this territory?

## Transitivity and Relationality

A central goal of "My Breath, My Gravity" is to create a level of awareness through physical engagement of the audience. In the past I have used performance as way to encourage audience participation, with sculptural works set-up on display table in a marketplace environment. Presenting objects within a performance context creates a more interactive and social environment to be experienced rather than solely observed. Nicolas Bourriaud similarly describes the role of art and its reception as shifting away from the isolated viewing position dictated by a traditional gallery space. In *Relational Aesthetics*, he argues that an artwork's meaning must be created amongst a group of people as a collective experience in the social world.

Relational art produces inter-subjective encounters. Through these encounters, meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than in the space of individual consumption.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to my painting practice, I began thinking of situating my painting in a similar interactive environment much like my display table. As a concept similar to the goals of relational aesthetics, David Joselit introduces the idea of "transitivity" in his article, "Painting Beside Itself." Transitivity is a "form of translation," wherein painting enters a new method of creation and reception as an inter-subjective encounter that is further extended beyond the walls of the gallery or museum space.

Transitive painting arises, therefore, as a dynamic equilibrium between two types of passage: those that are internal to a canvas, including mark-making and the delineation of motifs; and those that are external to it, encompassing the work's location in space, its position within a particular constellation of institutions, its relationship to art history, and the social connections established between author and spectators.<sup>4</sup>

Transitivity and relationality as concepts have influenced the installation of "My Breath, My Gravity." As an Anishinabe Kwe artist, I exist in the urban environment

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, Mathieu Copeland.(Dijon: Le presses du réel, 2002), 13.

<sup>4</sup> David Joselit, "2009b: Painting as social networks," *Art Since 1900: 1945 To The Present Vol. 2*, (New York:Thames and Hudson, 2004),747.

observing the invisibility of First Nations people through the eyes of mainstream culture. Cultural objects for sale in tourist shops are sold on the value of a cultural affiliation and not from the life of an actual person. At this level, I think a concept like transitivity is significant in order to establish a connection between an artwork and the identity of its maker, recognizing the context of where First Nations art is shown and sold within the history of colonialism. In my installation and the paintings therein, Bourriaud's and Joselit's concepts allow my "Nish" presence to be at the heart of the work. Beginning with the surface of the paintings, vivid "opens," "pops," and "riffs" activate beacons of First Nations presence wherein the stripes become more than just stripes- they becomes indexes of my life and my body. The cedar house further invites a physical interaction as an inquiry between the work and the observer, focusing on culture, economies and territorial presence.

## Chapter 2.

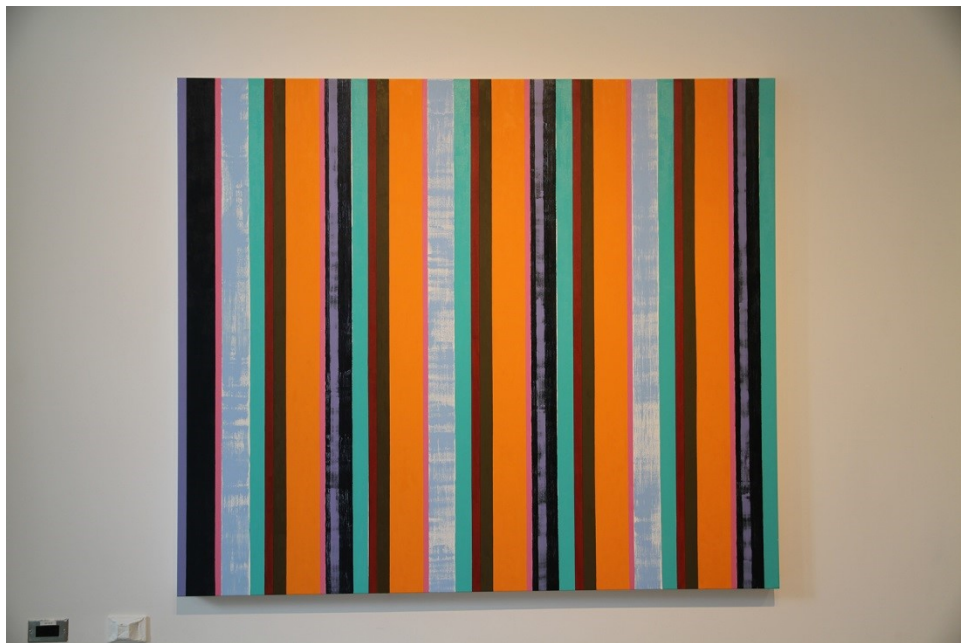
### My Breath, My Gravity Documentation



Image 1. Installation in the Audain Gallery



**Image 2. Everything Is Broken Up and Dances**



**Image 3. Floats Beneath Dragonflies Mating**





**Image 4. Drags of Blue Over My Feet**



**Image 5. Little Green For L.J. Vickers**



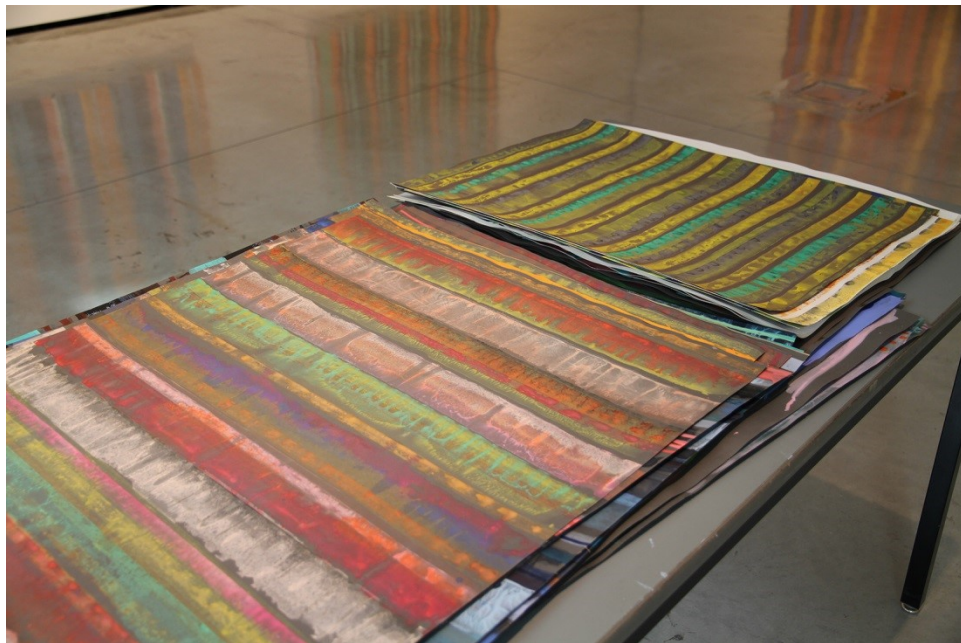
**Image 6. 157 Hammersmith One o'clock Jump**



**Image 7. 157 Hammersmith One o'clock Jump detail**



**Image 8. Take the A Train**



**Image 9. Hands On Archive Table with Acrylic and Gouache on Paper Paintings**



**Image 10. Three Small Paintings**

## Appendix.

### What Does It Ask of Me?: The Auratic Works of Faye HeavyShield and Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew

#### Introduction

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us in return.

Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 1968

How art can incite memory into becoming acts of bearing witness to socially transform us is the basis for investigation within this research. The enigmatic and shocking quality of art Walter Benjamin would describe as *aura*, reveals art as almost having its own life force mirroring our social experience within its object hood to "return the gaze" of the viewer<sup>5</sup>. Two First Nations artists, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew and Faye HeavyShield both create works that look back at us. What do their works ask of us? Are we asked to remember, witness or question? This paper will focus upon two individual works, Faye HeavyShield's "Untitled"(1992) and Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew's performance "White Shame"(1992) where they challenge us to take on all of these actions. How does perception of *aura* within an art work ignite our bodily cognition and memory?

This paper will take several theoretical routes to investigate how the experience of art can reveal memory, promote historical witness, and influence social transformation and healing. I will begin with Marianne Hirsch who introduces the idea of post memory. Hirsch defines post memory as a non-typical form of remembering by children of survivors of historic traumatic events. These children can have vivid memories of the event through photos and oral histories passed on by their family members even though they were not there to experience it in person.<sup>6</sup> Memory is integral in our own understanding how historic events impact our daily actions and decisions as individuals and for our

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" *The Writer of Modern Life*. p204.

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Post memory." *Poetics Today* 29 No.1 (2008):103.

greater society. The next concept I will introduce is Kyo Maclear's "prolonged gaze." She describes vision as integral to memory and the act of bearing witness where visual expression can initiate this process. Maclear states that through viewing art as a "prolonged gaze," survivors of incomprehensible tragedy such as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are able to begin to bear witness and to begin healing. The third section will explore Walter Benjamin's concept of Aura as activating memory through the experience of art as a kind of shock. Additionally, artworks and their emotive quality can pierce our memory through what Roland Barthes calls punctum wounding us into acts of remembering. I will recall how my own memory had been pierced upon viewing the minimal sculptural forms by Blackfoot artist Faye HeavyShield. A bodily memory of who I am as Anishinabe Kwe (Ojibway woman) was jilted into place, to begin my reclamation of my Aboriginal identity and history. How shock and punctum work together is further explored in the final section, where I create an analysis of Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew's performance *White Shame*. Marcia Crosby describes the performative body of Ahasiw as a kind of palimpsest whereby piercing his chest, Maskegon-Iskwew's act and body becomes a metaphor for the violence inherent in Colonialism itself; his skin, a slate to record and erase traumatic history.

### **Post memory: My skin is a living connection**

Memory is fluid and changes over time carried within the mind and body. It is activated through artworks within its visual presence as Aura to seductively cast its threads to the beholder immersing them in another kind of understanding and experience as post memory. Post memory's finely entwined threads of space and time collapses present into past, running through one's blood stream connecting our memory to fragmented histories. Marianne Hirsch describes post memory as an intergenerational transmission of memory and experience between family members echoing intensely through generations.

It is this presence of embodied experience in the process of transmission that is best described by the notion of memory as opposed to history and

best mediated by photographic images. Memory signals an affective link to the past, a sense of precisely of an embodied “living connection.”<sup>7</sup>

Post memory takes into account a sense of absence an individual may feel by not physically being there to experience the traumatic event. They carry a sense of guilt or loss in not being able to claim or feel connected to this moment in history. Post memory is usually conveyed through visual means such as photos as described by Hirsch but I expand upon this definition to include other mediums such as sculpture and performance that create “affective links to the past.” Just as the Auratic object is able to trigger a shock to activate memory, post memory is a similar experience of affect in our body. Our body becomes a connection to the past, “an embodied living connection.” Post memory has its own language expressed as illness, tears, aches, and nightmares.<sup>8</sup> Very different from the historical document expressed as concepts and words which can distort and sanitize personal accounts of traumatic memory. Post memory is experienced within our skin as feeling. “We look to be shocked (Benjamin), touched, wounded and pricked (Barthes’ punctum).”<sup>9</sup> Post memory as feeling through touch is crucial in reading the sculptural works of Faye HeavyShield and performance of Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew. Through the experience of art and performance First Nations can attempt to re-connect with their past, through an initial rush of feeling and cognition within our own skin.

### **The prolonged gaze, art that witnesses and living memory**

Kyo Maclear’s presents sight as integral to bearing witness. In her book, “Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness” seeing “something” can stir emotional and cognitive vibrations. By creating and looking at art initiating the act of “bearing witness” Atomic bomb survivors, the Hibakusha, can begin a healing process. Maclear introduces the “prolonged gaze” as a method to challenge media saturated bodily numbness and a way to “promote historical witness.”<sup>10</sup> How social and historic

<sup>7</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Post memory”, *Poetics Today*, 29, No.1(2008):111.

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”:106.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Kyo Maclear, *Beclouded Visions*, 12.

experience is visible or buried as images and information controlled by the government is the crux of her argument. When *Life Magazine* featured the iconic mushroom cloud on their cover she explains this is a “mind-image.”<sup>11</sup> The cloud insulates our understanding of the bomb’s impact as a human atrocity beclouding our vision. The visual information “seen” or controlled by governing powers via the media has direct impact upon our global political awareness.

To state that “seeing” something is crucial to the act of witness may sound naive but the multiple factors of government and media intervention that hinder knowing about historic events, is a frequent occurrence worldwide. To see is to know is to witness and empower. Making art that creates witness empowers to become an experience of social transformation. In regards to Maclear’s thesis I began to think of how the works of Faye HeavyShield and Ahasiw can help us understand how specific historical traumas have shaped the present for Aboriginal communities.

First Nations and their experience of mental and physical abuses at government-run residential schools were devastating for Aboriginal families and communities. Representing only a small portion of experience within the greater encompassing trauma of colonial domination this knowledge is carried in the bodies and mind-set of First Nations people influencing everyday actions and choices.<sup>12</sup> Both the history of the decimation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the colonization of Aboriginal people in North America have similar experiences of a suppression of voice and visibility. Through artistic means a re-insertion of personal memory and voice can re-enter into a mainstream social dialogue. I have personally experienced many instances where acts of bearing witness occurs at large gatherings of Aboriginal people at conferences, Pow wows and even AGM meetings. When First Nations speak publically a basic introduction of name and greeting will not do. Usually a longer back-story or life history is articulated to indicate who they are *as survivors*. Making history visible or heard, is a

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Bombay, *Intergenerational Trauma: Convergence of Multiple Processes among First Nations people in Canada*, 2003.  
[http://www.naho.ca/jah/english/jah\\_03/V5\\_I3\\_Intergenerational\\_01.pdf](http://www.naho.ca/jah/english/jah_03/V5_I3_Intergenerational_01.pdf)



significant part of our social dialogue as survivors, and extends into our cultural and artistic expression.

Kyo Maclear's concept of witness art and prolonged gaze are significant in establishing not just another re-iteration of historical documentation, but to create what she describes as a "living memory."<sup>13</sup> The Hibakusha (survivors) of the bombings recorded their experiences in writings and illustrations to show the extent of the aftermath of the bombing upon them as they continued to express their survival as "living memory." She places an urgency to continue creating "living memory" as the older generation of Hibakusha as witnesses and speakers of this experience are approaching the end of their lives. The post memory their bodies hold and express, will no longer exist or be accessed by the future generations. Within this urgency that Maclear stresses, passing down knowledge and history through the body is similar to the passing down of traditional languages and cultural practices for Aboriginal peoples. Elders as fluent speakers of indigenous language are passing away, the survival of these languages lies in peril. Our languages are described as the foundation of our culture and identity indicative of our survival of Colonialism. Art thus becomes another continuation, bridge or method of visual knowledge and physical expression to remember those who didn't survive and indicates our lived embodied memory as being indigenous. Maclear states:

The art of witness, rather, bids us to consider how a remembered image might gain new hold on our lives and actions. Memory work, beyond the ritual gesture of solemnity or nostalgia, involves such forays into social transformation.<sup>14</sup>

By creating witness art as "living memory," and further as post memory, it allows for a new re-reading of contemporary First Nations art practice. Works from the early 90's spoke out against social injustices of government assimilation policy, colonial violence and racism, poverty etc. To have a voice and be heard was significant for that moment in the art world for First Nations artists. The work of Faye HeavyShield and Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew came from this politically driven moment when Canada and

<sup>13</sup> Maclear pg. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* 27.

the United States were celebrating the 500th year anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas. 1992 was a key moment in history for artists and activists to speak out about the social and political situation in Canada for the First Nations population. Kyo Maclear presents a similar sense of urgency in regards to making witness art for survivors of the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Contemporary First Nations artists were speaking as witnesses of 500 years of colonial violence creating a "living memory" of their survival. Memory is intrinsically connected to survival and the preservation of customs, oral traditions, knowledge of the land and storytelling, further encoded through the body by learned expressions of joking, laughing and gestures. One may even state that memory is contained within our bones and genes.(Bergson) By reading contemporary Aboriginal art practices within the framework of memory, post memory and living memory, social transformation is already apparent. Healing as a theme of First Nations contemporary art practice will not be the signifier of victimhood, but instead, will indicate wealth of memory and empowerment.

### **Walter Benjamin's *aura* and its decay**

When we experience an artwork that tugs on our memory to draw us into its presence, this is what Walter Benjamin describes as the artwork's *aura*. I will focus on two of his essays, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" to initially establish *aura* as being the unique and authentic quality of an artwork, but, primarily my focus is to instill *aura* as able to trigger our memory within bodily cognition. *Aura* will be explored in relation to involuntary memory that enables a space for First Nations art to become sites of memory and feeling. How memory is triggered through sometimes-strange means, where Faye HeavyShield recalls a memory she often has of a dying deer's retina that reminds her of her father. This story she tells, coincides with a significant moment I had when I first viewed her work "Untitled," in 1992 as a slide projection in an art college seminar class. I *felt* the spark. I *felt* something shift inside me. I was being reminded of something- my ancestors. This is the core of where my interest in *aura*'s connection to memory began.

Before discussing more about this moment, I will develop a discussion of Benjamin's *decay of aura* in relation to ritual, distance and its presence in modernity within the scenario of the surgeon and the healer.

Walter Benjamin locates the origins of aura within the ceremony of religious art and ritual where art was kept hidden because of its sacred status. He advocates that aura sever its ties to ritual, whereby it maintains a “parasitic” relationship to the power of hierarchy itself.<sup>15</sup> Severing these ties occurs during the modern period through the developments of photography where technical methods of reproduction allow art to be seen by a larger audience and regular class of people, not solely by the Bourgeoisie. The mystery of the art object’s aura becomes fragmented, but its history and association to ritual is never fully dissolved. Benjamin explains:

Aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the authentic work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of the original use function.<sup>16</sup>

In mapping out a theoretical space of experience between artwork and viewer, Benjamin’s explanation of distance is paramount to defining its power to affect us or ignore us. Aura’s spatial relationship to human presence and its ability to affect our bodies is what is most important. Benjamin presents an analogy of the far-away mountaintop on the horizon or observing the closeness of a shadow cast by a tree branch to illustrate how distance affects our relationship and experience of aura.

Both the mountain range and the branch, Benjamin avers, have to be in their particular setting otherwise we would not be able to appreciate the way *their position in relation to us* affects our sensibilities.<sup>17</sup>

His depiction of the mountain-top and the shadow cast by the tree branch is almost religious in nature. The more true pure experience of *aura* occurs when there is a sense of far-awayness and mystery that aura is concealed within. He likens this positioning of aura as more authentic, pure and whole. When aura is closer to us, existing within the social world of modern urban experience, where upon technology resounds; its mystery begins to disintegrate. Walter Benjamin expands his discussion of distance’s influence upon aura within the scenario of the surgeon and the healer.(15)

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The Continental Aesthetics Reader.(London&NewYork: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 434.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art*. 434.

<sup>17</sup> Clive Cazeaux intro to *The Work of Art*, 434.

The two different approaches to the healing of the body as used by surgeon and the healer/shaman illustrate the influence of distance upon aura in a physical manner. The healer uses magic to keep aura intact, keeping the body in its whole pure natural state using his hands to hover over it in order to heal. The surgeon uses technology and modern medicine, to cut through the body with his surgical scalpel to heal. The precision of technology brings this closeness into a whole new light. The surgeon's knife heals cutting into the body, into the aura, dismembering the body's authenticity. Benjamin further compares the intact pure state of aura as likened to depicting reality as expressed by the painter, with the decay of aura as related to the action of a cameraman whose technology cuts the images into multiple frames in order to reconfigure them into a reel as cinema. But how can a concept like aura be understood and applied in everyday experience?

### **Memory of a dead deer and my forgotten past**

In Benjamin's essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," the auratic nature of the art object manifests a physical connection between the art object and viewer; similar to an interaction between two people. Aura shocks recognition to dislodge unconscious memory.<sup>18</sup> The ability of the auratic art object to incite memory within the viewer is aptly apparent within the form, process and meaning of Faye Heavy Shield's "Untitled." Robert Houle explains the significance of memory to her work:

HeavyShield uses memory as one of the most important elements in her creative process, through which she maps out a territory whose signposts consist of knowing how to speak the Blackfoot language, of seeing how to construct the ceremonial Sundance, and of feeling why there is beauty in an animal's gaze. She uses those cultural signposts as Mnemonic devices to bring into visual being objects which are to her fragments of reality.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999), 81.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Houle, *Land, Spirit, Power*, (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 154.

Her identity as Blackfoot allows her to see “beauty in an animal’s gaze.”<sup>20</sup> What Houle fails to mention within this reference to the gaze of the animal, is that HeavyShield was actually referring to a dead deer, recalling one of her earliest memories of hunting with her father.<sup>19</sup> Within the deer’s gaze a sense of solace comes to her as a memory, its glassy eye transmits a sense of serenity. The knowledge that the animal has given its life to nourish her family, “the beauty of its gaze” symbolizes life, her connection to her cultural past and memory of her father.



**Image 11. “Untitled,” 1992. Faye HeavyShield**

When I first looked at the work of HeavyShield in 1992, I was in my third year of Art College. I was at a moment in my life where the origins or history of things kept

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

peering at me from unexpected places. Upon looking at Heavy Shield's "Untitled" something "clicked" within my body. A sense of curiosity mixed with recognition flashed within me, it was the memory of my forgotten identity and buried history of who I was as Anishinabe Kwe (Ojibway woman). This is where my interest in aura as beckoner of the gaze has value in my own experience.

The auratic character of the art object can spark memory and "speak of a past and does not completely decipher it."<sup>21</sup> Memory as coming from a shock was derived by Benjamin to describe the experience of conflict within the self where upon the subconscious shields itself from the shocks of the modern city<sup>22</sup> as inspired by the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin reiterates the experience of shock as central to the creative process of the artist. Numbed and unable to access memory we were once capable, memory becomes accessed only through our experience of these shocks from the unconscious which Laura Marks describes as "brushes with involuntary memory."<sup>23</sup> My own "brush with involuntary memory" occurred when I first viewed Faye HeavyShield's "Untitled." In the early 1990's I was in a state of numbness; "to forget and to flatten memory" best describes my perspective at that moment. HeavyShield's work was pivotal in sparking my memory of who I was as an Anishinabe Kwe (Ojibway Woman)- speaking to my forgotten past as surreal dream-like tendrils of bodily knowledge rising from an unknown source. The *aura* of her work projected out to me from its imaginary bulbs to evoke memory piercing my flattened psyche. This experience is likened to what Roland Barthes calls that of *punctum*- an emotionally charged quality that pierces the heart of its viewer. A term usually associated with photography, I extend its purpose to include sculptural work conveying similar affective properties. Unlike *aura*, its close cousin, *punctum*, opens a wound from our past, cutting to the core of the viewer to reveal deeply embedded feeling. *Aura* seduces memory from its beholder as "beckoning luminosity"<sup>24</sup> whereas *punctum* takes the more direct route to wound us through emotion. HeavyShield's quills evoke a solace in the memory of her

<sup>21</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 180.

<sup>23</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 81.

father and the auratic gaze of the deer in death. If *aura* allows the art object to take on “human capabilities” such as sight, why do we privilege sight as solely a human trait? If Faye HeavyShield’s work speaks from the gaze of an animal- what does its gaze ask of me? Will its gaze nurture and give me solace or puncture and wound me?

### **Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew’s *White Shame*: My cyber-witness account**

#### ***Charlene’s observations of the Performance White Shame 1992* (Video stream viewing November 5, 2012)**

Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew’s body circulates throughout the performance space stepping through and over his audience members. Moving between tipi structure to slide projections, from a station of stones where he grinds charcoal and clay, to a hanging chain, to tipi enclosure again. He reads *I dream of your desire...my flesh, my bones*. Projected words in light on the wall “Medicine-Mekeke”-the Cree word Mekeke is blocked out with a handful of charcoal. He returns often to this action of blocking out faces and text within the projections. Making a paste from charcoal and clay, he pours it over his head, covering his body. He attempts to climb a length of steel chain, with wet hands never gaining a firm enough grip; gravity and the weight of his body pull him back. A helper smudges his back for him with sweet grass where upon he enters a tipi structure to cleanse a spot on his chest. He pinches his skin. Proceeding to pierce an upholstery needle through his flesh with some effort, the needle goes through. He takes an eagle feather and hangs it from the thread that was fed through the skin. Over the next twenty minutes he pierces his chest four more times, each time tugging at the skin to make sure it’s secure. He states: *My Blood Sings*.

Grandfathers, grandmothers, mother, you are in these words. The winds will carry my voice. He begins to shake a rattle. He calls his audience into action. Who will work? Who will work with me? The spectators are led into the alley at the side of the gallery where a fire burns. A stretched moose hide on a frame leans against a brick wall. Various members take turns to scrape the hide clean. The performance ends.



**Image 12.     *White Shame*, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew 1992**

### **The body as palimpsest**

Marcia Crosby presents Ahasiw's performing body as a slate/record of history, a metaphor of historical re-writing and transformation in her essay *White Shame*. The closeness and intimacy of the 90 or so people tightly congregated in the grunt gallery space magnifies the audiences' witness to Ahasiw's actions. A physical relationship between artist and audience becomes a body to body understanding. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes our perception of an art work as influenced by our experience of it through our bodies. Our bodily perception is truer than our thinking and conceptualization of the outside environment. He observes our bodies as:

It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching: it is visible and sensitive for itself. It is a self, not by transparency like thought, which never thinks



anything except assimilating it, constituting it, transforming it into thought.<sup>25</sup>

Marcia Cosby as a witness of the 1992 performance describes her experience as entering into a reciprocal relationship with the performer's body. As a beholder of his work and the *aura* of his skin the audience witnesses an uncovering of memory of hidden and ignored histories within their own bodies and experience. Ahasiw represents this oppressive erasure of history and assimilation through the act of blackening out slide projections of images of Aboriginal people and the Cree language with handfuls of charcoal. When he further covers himself with a red wool blanket to eventually pour a mixture of charcoal, ash and water over his head, his identity too becomes hidden and erased. His next action causes a rupture of emotion and sense of shock within his audience members. As Ahasiw proceeds to pierce his chest, a crisis is felt within the collective body of the audience. Through his flesh we feel our own flesh. When he pierces his skin, our breath stops- our muscles tense, our eyes focus and look away, our hands clench, we wince and shift our posture. He takes the audience to another dimension of Aboriginal historic knowledge, as post memory. When the audience witnesses Ahasiw's pain, debasement, and loss they take on this experience as feeling and memory within their own skin. When he punctures the upholstery needle through the folds of his flesh, not once, but 5 times, his body inhabits and represents the 500 years of monumental violence that Colonialism has had upon First Nations communities. The audience can begin to understand the violence of this history where the piercing of skin also occurs within their own bodies becoming an embodied teaching. Marcia Crosby states:

Ahasiw's body, his performance is the collective loss of colonization. He both represents and is the cultural and intellectual void left in the wake of this history.<sup>26</sup>

The sense of collective loss and shock taken on by the audience of *White Shame of 1992* is still being addressed today as a re-enactment by Adrian Stimson in April

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Merleau Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *The Continental Aesthetics*

<sup>26</sup> Marcia Crosby, *White Shame:1992*. Web essay accessed October 20 2012.

2012. Stimson states: “My act of piercing 7 times will be to renew Ahasiw’s original performance, to honour friends suffering from disease, for missing and murdered aboriginal women.”<sup>27</sup> His re-visiting the work includes: writing on walls, cleansing the body with ash and clay, and piercing his chest to memorialize and honor Ahasiw’s life’s work and of his passing away in 2006. Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew’s *White Shame* will be remembered through internet archives immersed in the technology and mediums he loved: performance, video and internet media streams allowing its auratic power to remain pervasive and luminous.

### **Vancouver Performance: 1992**

To further understand Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew’s performance I conducted two interviews with audience members Glen Alteen and Paul Wong whom both attended the original performance in 1992 and its re-enactment in 2012. The Vancouver art scene in 1992 was very in the moment, raw, edgy, optimistic and riveting. It was a pivotal moment in Canadian First Nations politics and contemporary artistic expression influenced by the Mohawk blockade in Oka Quebec and the 500 year celebration of Columbus discovering Indigenous land. This is the politically charged period from which *White Shame* emerged. To further contextualize what was happening in Vancouver at that time, Glenn Alteen, director of grunt gallery and Paul Wong, director of On Main gallery, have provided me with their insights. Both of these art instigators have been part of the Vancouver arts scene for the past 30 plus years.

Back in the late 80s and early 90s, Vancouver’s “community of makers and see-ers” was very strong and open to experimentation both in a conceptual and political sense. Issues of race and representation were gaining prominence,<sup>28</sup> artist run spaces such as grunt created spaces for marginal voices. It was a nexus of Aboriginal, Gay and Lesbian, Two-Spirited creativity. Paul Wong recalls grunt as a safe space where anyone could show up and say “I wanna do this,” and there would be support to make it happen. The greater Vancouver performance art scene Wong describes as: “Chaotic, thirsty and questioning and not rehearsed to fucking death.” The community was very tight, but it’s

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.onmaingallery.com/projects/ghostkeeper> accessed on December 6, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Wong, from “Interview November 9, 2012.”

expression-organic and aggressive. Very in your face with a “punk rock DIY and fuck you attitude.”<sup>29</sup> Ahasiw’s approach reflected this brashness, bringing in many different elements, personal experiences and interests in a “mash-up” aesthetic.<sup>30</sup> His work inhabited a spontaneous space of performance balancing on the edge of ritual and spectacle, residential school and S&M.<sup>31</sup> Both Alteen and Wong describe his approach as working intuitively and in the moment- not asking permission to use ceremonial smudging, eagle feathers and chest piercing. The sense of urgency of “now” and “just doing it” that both Alteen and Wong describe reflects Ahasiw’s the political view point influenced by the violent stand-off at Oka and seeing loved ones dying of AIDS.<sup>32</sup> The reaction of “outrage, shock and grief” expressed by the audience members who were witness to the piercing of skin may have thought it too “real” of a moment to process. For many First Nations audience members this act was too close to home. There was contention regarding the use of sacred ceremonial elements in a public context where drinking took place.<sup>3334</sup> Paul Wong explains that Ahasiw’s intention was not to make a ceremony.

I would say that someone like Ahasiw, who wanted to work with all those things and colliding those things, started asking all those questions. Where does this come from? Where doesn’t this come from? Historical reference or no historical reference, political correctness, or traditional correctness? I mean we didn’t, if we had to get permission from our elders, whatever that means again, to what we want to do, we would never get permission; it would take forever.<sup>34</sup>

Ahasiw took his audience into unfamiliar territory. They felt the needle puncture their own skin to rupture historic pain and re-open past wounds. He took his audience members into his own world and auratic body to disorient, shock and create witness.

<sup>29</sup> *Art and Identity Politics: Vancouver in the 1990’s, A Conversation with Laiwan, Archer Pechewis, and Paul Wong, February 26, 2012 recorded at grunt gallery.*  
<http://performance.gruntarchives.org/essay-art-and-identity.html>

<sup>30</sup> Wong, “Interview November 9, 2012”

<sup>31</sup> Alteen interview November 9, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Alteen interview November 9, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Alteen interview November 9, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Alteen interview November 9, 2012.

By using ritualized elements, the auratic power carried with the objects themselves had potential but lay dormant. Eagle feathers as once spiritually potent, now hung as limp and lifeless forms from a punctured wounded body. The visible wounds, once indicative of ceremonial acts in prayer, now served to shock the audience as self-mutilation. Ahasiw challenged the idea of the purity and preciousness of the ceremonial object and body. The practitioner presents his body as a truer self, not as the romanticized stoic Brave. His body becomes a hybrid expression: not solely being a Cree artist, but a Queer Cree artist.<sup>35</sup>

### **Colliding: Histories, theories, emotions**

In 1992, two years after the violent stand-off at Oka between Kanesatake Mohawks and the Canadian military, the urgency of Maskegon-Iskwew's work reflected the anger and pain many First Nations people felt across Canada. That of being marginalized, targets of violence, or just plain invisible. Ahasiw's body spoke from this social and political reality. By titling the work *White Shame*, he implicated a large portion of his audience to confront them with their own white privilege asking them how they contribute to the position of the dominant imperialist power structures. Of all his ritualized actions within the performance, the chest piercing is what remains in the memory of audience members today. Glenn Alteen states: "It was a hard piece to watch- the performance itself was very intense- there was a lot of tension in the room when he was piercing his chest-there was a sense of debasement...a feeling of being implicated."<sup>35</sup> His use of ceremonial elements within the work is still labeled by some as being sacrilegious. Questions and debate remain.

To conclude, by navigating the space between the auratic art object/performance body and the viewer I have presented culminations of histories, theories and emotions. Walter Benjamin's ethereal concept of "Aura," inhabits the core of Marianne Hirsch's post memory to emanate and flicker as living memory. So too, does Roland Barthes' punctum wound us- shaking our foundations. What emerges is visibility, to expose and expand our emotional and historical breadth of knowledge. Just as Faye HeavyShield's enigmatic sculpture beckoned my attention to infiltrate my psyche, the piercing of

<sup>35</sup> Alteen interview November 9, 2012.

Ahasiw's flesh awakens collective knowledge of the historic and contemporary violence upon Aboriginal people. How we bear witness can occur through what Kyo Maclear describes as prolonged gaze by looking and experiencing art. What we witness sparks a collapse in time and space, an echo of our traumatic past. Post memory provides a method of "living memory," a narrative of survival for future generations of Aboriginal youth who live in the shadow of racism and violence. Bearing witness as survivors, through art and performance illuminates and empowers as social transformation. Memory and witness of another's trauma creates a dialogue between people to become a collective shared experience. Both Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew and Faye HeavyShield's work activates this memory, to agitate the wound; puncture, pierce and destabilize "beclouded" sensibilities. Although the act of bearing witness may shake our foundations; the visible transforms, revealing forgotten wounds and buried memories. These steps are painful and crucial before healing begins.

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