

Rebecca Belmore reflects on *Private Perimeter*

Interviewed by Shawn Van Sluys

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In early 2012, Musagetes and the Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario (GNO) invited Rebecca Belmore to develop a new project in Sudbury, Ontario. After a research visit in September 2012, Rebecca returned for a production residency in May 2013 during which she created *Private Perimeter*, a video work and installation first presented at the GNO co-curated by Danielle Tremblay and Alissa Firth-Eagland. The resulting work was a single channel video projected on a large, custom-built screen in the centre of the gallery which replicates the dimensions and materials used in highway signage. The 'sign' was installed facing away from the viewer, such that they first encounter the back of it as they enter the space. Installed in the window-front for street level passersby to see is a close-up of a roaring river.

The day after the exhibition opened, Rebecca and Shawn sat on a large black boulder overlooking the Kingsway and discussed her experience of Sud-

bury, the creation of the work, and her engagement with the world. Later that year, Belmore was granted the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.

Shawn Van Sluys: Why don't we start by talking about the line that you wrote before you got here?

Rebecca Belmore: "Somewhere between a town, a mine and a reserve is a line", is what I wrote before arriving here. I think it was a way for me somehow to give myself a thread to hang onto and follow once I got here to Sudbury in order to figure out what kind of work I was going to make. So I really was setting some kind of task for myself.

SvS: The first time that you visited Sudbury was in September of 2012. At that time what inspired you to think about lines?

RB: I was just really impressed with how this town is built and the fact that it is built around the rock. What I found, even when I arrived here again this spring, is that I had a difficult time figuring out which direction was which. I think that's because the town is not built on a grid. It's built around the rock. That really impressed me. I was also impressed by the fact that where Darlene Naponse lives, her reserve, her community—the Whitefish Lake Reserve—is very much on the edge of the city. All of this territory, this land around here, is connected by the lakes. And, of course, in the centre of it all is the mine.

SvS: All of the roads criss-cross the city. Right now we're looking out over the Kingsway which is a perfect example of a road that runs between the rocks.

When you came here in the spring you met with many different groups of people and you were thinking about the landscape and the way in which the city sits within the landscape in relation to industry and mining. In that context you were also interested in the ways that culture takes its form in the city.

RB: When I arrived here a couple weeks ago, I was driving around with Emilio Portal, and we were just looking and doing things—doing a lot of driving around. And then through that process of being in the town and moving through the town, I started to see that because the season had changed, I noticed that people were kind of cleaning house in some way.

For example, in the big box parking lots I found it very strange that workers were sweeping up sand. Dust was blowing through these big empty parking lots—they were actually using mechanized machines to blow the dust. And I thought that was a really strange and peculiar image. But it makes sense because they put so much sand down in the winter, for the ice, for the vehicles.

So it was really interesting to start to notice that there were so many people working outside. Many of them were wearing safety vests with a big X on the back. So I went to a safety supply store and bought myself a vest too. I was trying to link myself to them, because this is basically how I see it: this town is very much tied to industry, and it's very blue-collar. Without workers there's no mine, right?

I was trying to immerse myself in some conceptual manner by donning a vest and becoming a worker myself, to think about this place, how the people who live here exist.

SvS: There are a number of themes that emerge from this: labour, the X, the artificial, manufactured landscape, the green-washed slag heaps.

Your original project idea was to create an X on the side of one of the slag heaps. Can you describe that project?

RB: It would've been a great project, but unfortunately the mining company didn't take even five

minutes to consider it. So with that initial project I wanted to work on their property—which is private property—with a crew of workers to create a drawing, a drawn X, on one of the green-washed slag heaps. It was going to be large enough so that it would be visible from the parking lot of the Big Nickel tourist centre.

I was interested in labour and the workers, and artists as workers. So really that's all I was trying to do with that piece, to use what is there—which is basically a fake green hill that looks lovely. If you didn't know, you would just think it was a beautiful hill that has nothing on it but grass.

SvS: A very uniform hill...

RB: ...with some little scraggly dead trees on top. I would have liked to have done that project because it would have been a beautiful drawing made through physical labour by workers. In a poetic way I was trying to merge that with the idea that, well, this town is built around a mine. It exists because of what's in the ground.

I had this idea of digging and overturning the soil, overturning the land. I was planning to re-seed it so that the grass would grow again and the X would disappear. I really wanted to do that project. But in the end, I found my X. I put it on my back like it's on everybody else's back in this town.

SvS: There's the mark-making that miners do in their everyday lives, but we don't see it because

it's underground—it's poetically analogous to the mark-making that you do as an artist. The line and the X and the worker and the iconography of labour are all built into the piece. Did you think much about that analogy, the relationship between the mark-making of a miner and that of an artist?

RB: Yes, absolutely. I think it's because of the mystery of mining. As you said, we don't know what goes on down there. It's really easy to not be aware of it even more so because it's all fenced up; you can't trespass. It's fascinating that the town lives around it and most people don't get to see what it actually is that they're doing underground. In some way that's how an artist works; people just see the finished product. They often don't get to experience the process. Maybe that's how I see myself: the artist as worker.

SvS: Your performance of drawing a line connects back to the one-line poem that you wrote: "Somewhere between a town, a mine, a reserve is a line." The line is somewhat elusive in the work because you never really know where it is or what it is. Was it one long contiguous line? Or was it drawn in parts?

RB: I don't pre-plan or try to over-anticipate its meaning or my intent with it. I just went with it.

What was really great is, for example, the shot where I'm standing in front a heap of broken rock, boulders, and I'm standing and holding my hand up in the air and the tape is blowing in the wind. It was extremely windy that day—a really aggressive, vio-

lent wind. My performative action for the camera was just to place myself in different environments and let the tape do its thing. So there the tape was creating—it's captured on video so you get to see the beauty of the line from a distance.

It's captured on video. But in real-time, in the moment, as I'm standing there with my back to the one who was watching me, the camera, I experience the beauty of the wind—and the strength and the power of the wind. For me, those little private moments are private, performative moments for myself to enjoy as an artist.

I knew that the line must look beautiful because I can feel it. I can feel the wind. And I can sense that this must be an interesting image because it is like a line being drawn by the wind. The motion is full of energy.

But at the same time the line has a limited length; it's not limitless. I think that's a kind of measure of our—and by that I mean human beings—our lives in a poetic manner. We have only so much time; we don't know what's in the distance, or how far it is away, or when we'll be finished here on this earth. So I think that's how I began to think of the tape as drawing lines.

SvS: It's a contemplative act for you as an artist to make the drawing. And it is for the viewer as well, when we watch the video. They're incredible moments. The one where you're standing in the water and just gazing out into the distance, where you

can't even see the horizon line because the water and the sky sort of blend into one. Can you talk about that moment for you, standing there in the water?

RB: I forget what the name of the lake is, but it's a lake on Whitefish reserve. We arrived there early in the morning. We had gone there on a beautiful windy day so I wanted to go back to film. To my surprise then, the day that we went to shoot, it was really calm. But that became a beautiful thing because then I had to change gears and come up with another idea of what kind of image could we make there.

So I decided to walk into the water. The water was so still a reflection was possible. And so, standing in the water, halfway up my shins, I just stood still. I think I stood for about seven minutes. And then everything calmed, calmed myself. And I could hear all kinds of birdsong. All kinds of birds were doing their thing in the early morning. And it was just really a beautiful moment for myself again, being present, and being quiet and still.

It was a great moment in my Sudbury experience.

SvS: Contemplation is an aspect of artistic practice. There's an element of being embodied in the landscape, being there, being present, but there's also a contemplative aspect of the video.

While watching the video, I sensed a strong political aspect to it.

RB: Of the town, the mine, and the reserve, I believe that the reserve is the one that has not really benefited from the mine being here, beyond the workers who have jobs there. The black rock is being broken and built upon. All this environmental damage that has been a result of mining is really fascinating. Again, I thought about this in the video when I go up this hill to the tailing pond. People who live in towns like this—or anyone, I guess—don't have access to information. What exactly is going on? How are we mining? How is this affecting our bodies? How is it affecting the environment? How is it affecting the water? What's going on? I don't know how to speak of it.

SvS: The video contrasts this powerfully with images of the stillness, the beauty, and the contemplation of the lake on the reserve, and images of the black, muddy water spewing out of this pipe into the tailing pond. And you have also included the clear, crystal water splash photograph in the window at Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario. Inside the gallery, the video is projected on a road sign. Why did you choose that installation format?

RB: Through the process of extensive driving that I did for this project, encountering workers, and being on the road, I noticed that there's a lot of road construction. So I decided to create a projection screen that was a double-sided sign. When you enter the gallery, you see the back of the sign first. And then you have to go around to see the front. I think the way I placed it is important because it's this whole idea that there is the front face. But also

there is the back, which is less desirable and usually less important. It is somehow connected to this idea that the mine has a front, it has the face that it wants us to see. And then it has the back, the side that we're not supposed to see.

SvS: And when you are at the perimeter of the mining company's properties you have all these signs that say "Do not enter. No trespassing." The title of the work and the exhibition is *Private Perimeter*.

RB: In the video you never see my face; you only see the back of me. And even on the sign itself, the screen, the backside is just me standing, contemplating in that beautiful still water, standing. It looks like a still image but it is a video image. It really is about what we don't see; it's about privacy, private property. Everything is owned. Whether it's the government or industry or private individuals or whatever First Nations people have left for their own communities, the reserve. There are lines everywhere.

SvS: Yesterday at the opening of the exhibition, you commented that when you look at Google maps you can see a green space off to the side of Sudbury. That's Whitefish Lake Reserve. It is very distinctive. Being an Aboriginal artist, is there an aspect of the separation between the reserve and Greater Sudbury that interests you?

RB: Yes. The reserve is a totally different place. And most people don't get to experience that except for Aboriginal people because it's our territory that we

have left to live on and to live off of. It's very easy for me to go to these communities and feel my own sense of place. I feel connected to this idea that we do have some lands left. And it's very important to hang onto that and to take care of it.

SvS: You were able to work with a couple of other Aboriginal artists on the project.

RB: Yes. I met Darlene Naponse and her husband Julian Cote in September at a screening of one of her films in the movie theatre here in Sudbury. I was really impressed by the film. We got along very well in a very short period of time. I felt very comfortable with her and I could tell that she has great filmmaking skills. She has an amazing studio on the reserve for both music and video editing.

So I decided to ask if she would work with me to document the actions. Actually she offered and I took her up on it. We hung out together for the two weeks I was here.

I spent the early part of the residency with Emilio Portal (also an Aboriginal artist) but once I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do, I started to have conversations with Darlene to figure out how to work together. I said to her that we just need to make something that looks really beautiful. And I think we accomplished that because she has a great eye for composition. I'm so pleased with her work, the quality of her work, and her talent as an artist.

SvS: And Julian Cote did the electric guitar riffs, the music.

RB: I met him a couple of times and then he had to go off to the big city to do some work. He happened to have some guitar riffs that he had already recorded. So I asked him for some dirty guitar sound. He dug it out and said, "Okay, how does this sound"? And then he let me use it.

SvS: Why the electric guitar?

RB: I think it was giving it some kind of gritty sound. And, you know, kind of rock and roll a little bit. Because I think of Sudbury, or cities like this, industry towns, as kind of rough and tough.

SvS: In an interview at the opening of the exhibition you talked about Sudbury as being a sort of industrial 'anyplace' and the worker as a sort of 'anybody'. Are Sudbury and its workers a stand-in for something larger in the world?

RB: In 1999, Osvaldo and I lived in Fort McMurray for 6 months. We spent a winter there. Sudbury reminds me of that experience. Sudbury could be Fort McMurray. It could be Thunder Bay. I come from a blue collar family so I appreciate labour. I appreciate that people have to have an income, they have to work in places where they don't necessarily want to work. But that's where we have to work because that is where we live.

And I think this kind of situation could be anywhere in the world, really. As human beings, we take from the earth for our own well-being. And to do that requires the bodies of people. It requires the bodies to perform the labour and to extract whatever it is that we're taking. I hope the video honours that kind of activity by speaking in a positive way about the reality of how we live.

We're facing challenges today, with respect to global warming, and all those things that we worry about, or that we should worry more about. I hope that Private Perimeter will somehow resonate for the people who come and see it, that the local people who live here can somehow, in some way, think about this place where they live.