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***Unvanishing Traces* curated by Sanjit Dhillon and Vince Rozario**

Mikayla de Bruyn, Megan Feheley, Ashley M Freeby,
Aaron Moore, Maanii Oakes, and Ayo Tsalithaba

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We live in an age of hypervisible catastrophe. Confronting the hypervisible onslaught of death, trauma and tragedy amidst racialized communities in a rapidly rightward-veering political climate seems to only compound on the injury of catastrophe. The process of assembling *Unvanishing Traces* therefore began with a series of refusals, explicitly acknowledging the failures in creating artwork that addresses the abject nature of sudden and brutal death. There would be no resolution, no closure, no explicit bodily representation of the departed. There would also be an active process of distancing the outside observer from the intimate and necessary process of mourning to those directly affected. These were necessary considerations to not re-activate or mine racialized trauma. But in distancing the aesthetic dimensions of the exhibition from the material reality of these deaths, by inducting them into the realm of 'art' we become complicit in the systemic injustices that compound the death and suffering of precarious and disenfranchised bodies. The past year, in the new cycle in Toronto has seen 65 homicides¹, 239 fatal overdoses², along with around 174 new cases of missing and murdered indigenous women³. The crisis is hypervisible in every form of mass media- but particularly, and quite peculiarly in this age, on social

¹ TPS Crime Statistics- Homicide." [Data.torontopolice.on.ca](http://data.torontopolice.on.ca). Accessed October 25, 2018.
<http://data.torontopolice.on.ca/pages/homicide>.

² These are figures collected by the between August 3rd, 2017 and October 21, 2018. City of Toronto. "Toronto Overdose Information System." Accessed October 25, 2018.
<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-inspections-monitoring/toronto-overdose-information-system/>.

³ As of this writing, this is still a very approximate number despite the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, which has still failed to gather accurate statistics on the issue. Wherry, Aaron. "How an

media. We survey the continually unfolding tragedy through the rigid gridlines of our facebook and twitter timelines, the incomprehensible horror of contemporary tragedy is packaged into gruesome still and moving images of violence, readily conveyed and transacted through the 21st century's defining mode of communication.

**HOW DO WE REMEMBER SOMETHING OR SOMEONE
WHEN CONTEMPORARY METHODS OF REMEMBERING
BETRAY THE MEMORY OF THE DEAD?**

The gallery space here is very much a mirror of the digital containers through which we access racialized trauma.. The visual logic of a gallery space mirrors that of the grids on our computer screens. Both present themselves as panoptic devices- giving the illusion of omniscience. They can thus reinforce dominant power structures, and the viewer's biases when consuming narratives of racialized trauma. Hence, visibility, representation or education are not the goals here. There is no mimetic representation of the dead, nor are there sensationalized headlines or provocations. As a result, the work can appear cryptic or not explicitly attached to their subject- they indicate deeply contemplative and ongoing processes of dealing with trauma. It's possible to simply 'scroll past' the work in the gallery, much as one would in virtual space since it does not traffic in the rhetoric of sensationalism. At the same time, distancing work about trauma from its subject matter can be similarly fraught, as it mimics the erasure that systemic violence imposes upon its victims. In discussing the work of Doris Salcedo, which commemorates the victims of the Colombian Civil War, Rebecca Comay notes that "Violence likes to occult itself—the apparatus of terror requires this obfuscation—and one of the most systematic mechanisms of disappearance' is that the traces of disappearance are made to disappear."

The subject matter of this show thus straddles the uncomfortable paradox of naming the unnameable, while engaging with the horror of that which is undeniable.

'unflinching Gaze' on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Might Move Canada Forward." CBC, August 4, 2016.

HOW DO WE HOLD SPACE FOR THOSE MOST VULNERABLE TO THE SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION IN WHICH WE ARE COMPLICIT?

Nevertheless, the remnants of systemic atrocities hide in plain sight around us. The places where lives are lost continue to be trodden upon, eulogized, and ultimately co-opted into a grander redemption narrative that all too often leaves behind the most afflicted. Hashtags like [#TorontoStrong](#) or [#UntilWeAreAllSafe](#) lull the general populace into a false sense of discomfort while the violence continues. Even presenting these events as 'tragedies' or 'violence' feels banal and euphemistic. To anyone who is close to these crises, the scope of violence enacted by contemporary systems of oppression are numbing both in their totality and their surgical precision. Deploying the language through which these occurrences are epistemically formulated leaves us in an exhausting cycle of self-fulfilling catastrophe. There is a symbolic obliteration of these lives- they undergo a second death in being remembered through the gaze of the oppressor- or at the very least, of those implicated and complicit in these tragedies.

WHAT POSSIBILITIES FOR ACTIONS EXIST OUTSIDE OF PERFORMATIVE DEFAULTS?

Confronting the material remains of state-sanctioned violence, Ashley M. Freeby confronts the section of road on Canfield Drive in Ferguson Missouri where Michael Brown's body lay, for 238 minutes, after he was killed by a police officer. The Brown family petitioned to have this section of road removed and replaced. Freeby contemplates this poetic gesture which renders the site as an unexpected anti monument, and attempts to reconstruct the site in her own medium- 950 lbs of hand-painted gravel. *Remnant no. 1*, the work displayed in the exhibition is the plastic substrate of this gravel surface. It bears an unjustified pattern of black paint, left by contact with the gravel layer. This transference of paint renders this sub-layer the holder of the story, the memory, and the trauma against black and brown bodies in the United States. This intervention thus demarcates the plastic surface as a space

between the “memorial,” the artist herself, and the viewer. In bringing this “space of memory” into the gallery, Freeby also examines modes in which gestures of mourning can be communicated, learned and performed- thereby grafted prosthetically into communal practice. In referencing the process by which it was created- *Remnant no. 1* also presents new modes of imagining complicity. Subsequent installations of the work will be executed from a set of instructions compiled by Freeby, in the absence of the artist. By sifting through trays of gravel and paint, blackening one’s hands, by choosing to tread or walk around the gravel surface of the original sculpture, the viewer and those assisting in creating and installing the work are thus invited to viscerally consider their complicity in systems of oppression that disenfranchise and erase Black lives.

**HOW DO WE GIVE SPACE TO ARTISTS EXPLORING ART AS
A SITE FOR HEALING, AND PROTECT THEM FROM THEIR
TRAUMA BEING FETISHIZED BY VOYEURS?**

Ayo Tsalithaba and Meghan Feheley contemplate the never-ending cycle of mourning and healing in a context of continuous violence against Black and Indigenous bodies. In deeply personal ways, the artists initiate gestures of mourning, but also resilience and capacity building- alluding to ongoing practices of support, care and fortification. Feheley’s *Bundles for Hard Times* is a series of deer hide bundles containing messages and affirmations in the Cree language (both in syllabics and Roman orthography) intended as a message for other dispossessed peoples past/present/future. Bundling these messages offers them as votives which can facilitate understanding and witnessing. The inclusion of Cree is also hopeful, in anticipating that the recipient of the message will be able to read and understand it. The accompanying audio piece ponders how, “our bodies exist in a vacuum of continuous shattering, shame and humiliation,”⁴ and confronts the despair of continually shoring up one’s defences against a regime that continually threatens to erase one’s existence. Feheley’s narration in the audio component of the installation both narrates the continual trauma of existing as an Indigenous person in a settler state, while offering quiet messages of comfort and reassurance. Similarly, Tsalithaba

⁴ Feheley, Megan. *Bundles for Hard Times*. Mixed-Media Installation (deer hide bundles, beadwork, audio). 2018

seeks to create safe digital spaces for contemplation and healing in order to mitigate the harm that racialized and queer people often face in these environments Black, Indigenous, Racialized, Queer and/or Trans people often have their trauma exacerbated by a constant barrage of images of similar bodies being misrepresented, brutalized and even killed. By shifting the narrative of continuous trauma in their work, Tsalithaba is thus able to provide space for people to have alternative representations of marginalized individuals that are not traumatizing and violent.

HOW DO YOU ARTICULATE FEELINGS WHEN LANGUAGE, PARTICULARLY THE STRUCTURES OF LANGUAGE FAIL IN DOING SO?

The difficulty of positing art as a meaningful response to the senseless onslaught of violence against racialized bodies, when the art-making and exhibition itself is complicit in inequality, was a core consideration in the creation of *Unvanishing Traces*. As Comay writes, “On the one hand, it is the task of art to commemorate suffering. On the other hand, art, by its very existence— its status as a thing among things—is complicitous in this suffering.” Hence, Maanii Oakes and Mikayla de Bruyn take the aesthetic practice of processing trauma outside the walls of the gallery. In fifteen designated sites, related to 15 people the pair have lost in the past year- to economic precarity, mental illness, substance use, and institutional violence, Oakes and de Bruyn collaborate to create provisional memorials- making use of posters and found assemblages. By engaging in interventions that actively circumvent the aesthetic norms of high art, Oakes and de Bruyn open up new modes of engagement with the memory of the departed. People who may have known them can access these votives as sites of memory and the tactile nature of de Bruyn’s assemblages invites participant interaction. Visitors can leave their own mementos of the departed, opening up the possibility for evolving, complex, and integrative gestures of mourning that center the experiences of those who knew these individuals first and foremost. While working from a specific experience, it was important for the artists not to disclose the identities of those being mourned, in respecting the autonomy and self-determination of these individuals. They examine the challenge of naming violence against indigenous, or otherwise racialized bodies, in the collective singular- as

iterations of a monolithic neo-colonial system, while exploring the specifics of a particular tragedy.

**HOW DO WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE VIOLENCE AGAINST
PRECARIOUS BODIES WITHOUT EXPLOITING THEM, AND
THEIR INDIVIDUALIZED/SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES?**

In contemplating a container that mirrors the mechanics of how racialized trauma is accessed by outside observers, the role of the photographic image in mediating public response to collective trauma was central. Aaron Moore's work applies this reflexivity to images of strife and crisis, mining the archive to deconstruct images to their most base visual elements- halftone dots and negatives. These are then arranged and rearranged in a seemingly endless array of compositions- as if trying to reconfigure meaning out of visual data that has no context. In this series, Moore references archival images of The Ward, a historically working-class immigrant neighbourhood in Toronto that is now the Discovery and Financial Districts. As a new settler on Turtle Island, Moore uses this archive as a departure point for exploring both local history, and his own subjectivity as a new settler, treading in the footsteps of previous generations of working class immigrants. In deciding to obfuscate the indexicality of these archival images, Moore also self-critiques his own subjectivity, which could otherwise easily default to a voyeuristic interpretation of racialized subjects by a white settler gaze. This is the only work in the show that does not explicitly address death, but it resonates in its examination of the socio-economic forces of displacement in dialogue with Ayo Tsalithaba's haunting exploration of urban spaces of trauma. Moore's settler subjectivity also provides a pendant platform for settlers to access this work- much of which centers loss and mourning in Indigenous communities. It invites critical introspection from the viewer in examining how much of ourselves we project onto images of victims when they appear in news or the media. The implication here is that the image itself is an artefact removed from lived reality, that always mediates the experience of its subject through the motivations of its maker and the discursive context in which it is presented.

**HOW DO WE INVOKE/ENGINEER EMPATHY WHEN
DISENGAGEMENT IS INCENTIVIZED OR WHEN DETACHMENT**

BECOMES AN INSTINCTUAL RESPONSE FOR SURVIVAL?

In our positionality as non-Black, non-Indigenous curators, there is a lack of embodied context that prevents us from commenting upon these deaths in a manner that reveals anything that has not been articulated hundreds, if not thousands of times, by those who have lost loved ones. Our cerebral observations on the nature of this trauma can only begin to grasp its scope. Hence it is critical that we examine the constraints of the container that we build, in which these artists may explore modes of mourning, remembrance, and healing. Our act of curation is a reflection on the ways in which our own bodies, and their embodied gazes, are folded into complicity with structures of settler colonialism, anti-indigeneity and anti-blackness which cause the loss of personhood. As members of a 'model minority' we benefit from our proximity to whiteness and the social mobility which this affords. We may be shaken by the sheer brutality of the reality around us, and by the magnitude of grief afflicting our friends and members of our community. It is, however, not up to us to offer redemption, to coddle those least likely to be targets of this violence into a false sense of security and innocence. The limitations of the medium functions in such a way that it cannot overtly, "depict violence, identify victims or perpetrators, supply the forensic details of a crime, elucidate its political and economic context, or provide moral instruction."⁵ We can simply create a context in which the viewer is both hyper-aware of their own positionality by disrupting the thrill of voyeuristic affect. The hope is that these gestures and interventions can begin to shake us out of our toxic apathy. Perhaps they can help us unlearn our colonized subjectivities and become aware of the ways in which we enact epistemic violence upon the memories of the precarious dead. In turn, this can begin to initiate a process of affective solidarity that directly counters our complicity in this enduring cycle of loss and injustice.

NOW WHAT?

- Vince Rozario and Sanjit Dhillon

⁵ Comay, Rebecca. "Material Remains: Doris Salcedo." *Oxford Literary Review* 39, no. 1 (2017): 42-64.