

SPECTRES MATERIALIZING

An analysis of haunting in the works of Stephen Andrews and Jaime Black

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At first glance, the two projects are strikingly different. In one, the dresses hang as shrouds: in galleries, off craggy architecture, flapping their ribbons in the southern winds of abandoned meadows. They invite us to imagine their inhabitants, yet their emptiness inhibits this exercise. The fluttering emptiness of each dress becomes an impasse; grief tinges at the edges of their scarlet hue. The other makes us distinctly aware of their subject. Although the details of the face are obscured by the binary nature of their engravings, there is a person behind every portrait – including a name attached. The obfuscation becomes a point of cognitive dissonance, and we must spend time with each subject to work out his details. A flash of a smile visible here, a bowtie there. They remain both present and unintelligible. What brings the two projects together is the undeniable presence of someone(s) lost, and at the projects' scale, a clamouring history of preventable death at the hands of a system that denied them personhood. Jaime Black's *The REDress Project* and Stephen Andrew's *Facsimile* are undeniably haunted by persons who have had their narratives forgotten. Both oeuvres endeavor to have their subjects haunt the artwork; ensuring they are not forgotten again.

Haunting exists as an affective aesthetic and political tool for those whose personhood is threatening to the dominant colonial and patriarchal ideologies of late-capitalist contemporary life. Seen in the unreachable qualities of the *REDress Project* and *Facsimile*, the haunting of an artwork grants a complicated existence to a subject that has faced the violence of appearing as a one-dimensional narrative, if appearing at all. Haunting is a mediation between the subject and the social structure, a materializing and mattering, a rally cry for a new way to existence, a threat ideology attempts to distinguish. It is an act of resistance that exists before what is to be resisted.

French post-modern philosopher Jacques Derrida has been considered the first propagator of haunting or – in his language – hauntology. A phonetic play in the French original text,

hauntology *already exists* as a precursor to ontology; tracing its own edges before it was penned by Derrida. Conceived of in *Spectres of Marx*, hauntology was created as a factor of critique in Karl Marx's theory of use and exchange value. In *Capital*, Marx exposes the construct of the object possessing an inherent tie to its exchange value as a falsity of the bourgeoisie economic structure. Without this construct, the object is still under human governance. When the object enters the realm of the commodity, it rules the human social world.¹ To Derrida, the object bears an unruly becoming under its own agency before its entrance into the sensuous.² This is what it means to haunt.

Following Derrida, I am interested in not in the possibilities of haunting not as a spectre of the past, but an inherent and threatening becoming of the future. This idea has been taken up by later scholars as a framework from which to make persons who have been denied agency – and in turn, their own becoming under hegemonic colonial, patriarchal and homophobic ideologies – matter.

For scholars Angie Morill, Eve Tuck and the Super Futures Haunt Collective, haunting takes the form of materializing marginalized Indigenous bodies as a form of resistance. For sociologist Avery Gordon, haunting is an undeniable visibility of absence from which one can make meaning. In explaining materialization as a political and aesthetic tool of haunting in *The REDress Project* and *Facsimile*, I will be taking these two theories in a firmer grasp: haunting is the materialization of a visible absence reanimated by the mourning of the viewer within the two works.

¹ Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company) 270-273.

² Jacques Derrida, "Apparition of the Inapparent" in *Spectres of Marx: The state of debt, the work of mourning* (London: Routledge Press, 1993) 188-189.

Stephen Andrews' *Facsimile* addresses mattering through the opacity of memory in material. The absence of a formal figure becomes a vessel for the haunting subject – one that points to the viewer's own complicity in the spectre's erasure.

In speaking about *Facsimile*, it is important to first address the politics around the AIDS crisis in Canada. Government and healthcare officials refused to acknowledge the crisis in the country for years, resulting in the unbearable violence of state neglect. The epidemic was seen as a problem only affecting those in the United States; political mobilization was hindered by the rampant denial of the 1980s to early 1990s.³ *Facsimile* undertakes the expansive work of memorializing Torontonians who died of AIDS complications during these years. The project spans three years of reported AIDS related deaths in Toronto's biweekly queer newspaper *Xtra!*, beginning in 1990.

The work itself is composed of rows of encaustic images depict photographs from the publication's obituary section.⁴ They stretch across the gallery like soldiers names engraved into war memorials. Each portrait is carved from graphite layered over beeswax, encased in acrylic emulsion. They stand as monument in a world that allowed for AIDS related deaths to become pandemic. The portraits themselves are Andrews' attempts to "hold open a space" for bodies that no longer mattered.⁵

The process of materializing a purposeful neglect can be seen twofold in *Facsimile*: the portraits' fabrication and their reception. Obfuscation of form becomes integral to each portrait. The image's degradation results from its binary translation of a photograph through fax

³ Hazelle Palmer, "AIDS Committee of Toronto: Thirty years after confronting an epidemic" *The Toronto Star* (Toronto: ON), Aug. 20, 2013.

⁴ Stephen Andrews, "Video Visits: Stephen Andrews on Facsimile" YouTube video, 6:03, posted by "OakvilleGalleries" July 8th, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A-gihlUBdY>.

⁵ Stephen Andrews, "Video Visits" Ibid.

duplication. In speaking about his work, Andrews has cited the “forgetting technology” of the fax machine to be seminal in understanding the emotional weight inherent in the portraits.⁶ The act of engraving into the beeswax underlying the portrait’s graphite in the choppy, unforgiving manner of the fax machine speaks to a literally to carving out a space for a body that degrades over time. Each subject’s spectre is encased in the malleable forms of soft beeswax; in the mode of machinic memory. The mass of untouched graphite in each image allows for a certain agency of the depicted. In the abstraction of the extensive installation each negative space begins to speak to the next. The work does not only “hold a space” for a singular subject and narrative, but for a populace that had been consistently ignored and belittled by a politic unwilling to see its presence.

Andrew’s choice of abstraction engages with the complicit disremembering of its beholder. *Facsimile*’s imagery threatens the political mattering of grievable bodies; each portrait is on the edge of becoming, of mattering. And yet, the use of black negative space connotes an affective inaccessibility. The mind of the viewer must work to fill in the negative spaces of the pieces, with no other information than the subject’s name from which to build. The queerness of the unknown becomes a space as important as the details revealed in each image. To use the words of Avery Gordon, *Facsimile* becomes the visual manifestation of seeking a “shape described by absence.”⁷ Mourning this absence Haunting takes shape materially and psychologically in *Facsimile*, with its forms of irretrievable absence allowing for the shape of becoming in Andrews’ subjects.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Avery Gordon. “Her shape and his hand.” *Ghostly Matters: haunting and the sociological imagination*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). 4.

Absence finds its material becoming in *The REDress Project* in a more confrontational manner. To redress can be defined as to remedy or compensate for an unfair or unjust situation. *The REDress Project* is not a remedy or compensation; it is the deliberate outline of unbearable violence against Indigenous women and two-spirited peoples that has yet to be rectified. Like *Facsimile* the project stands to monumentalize narratives of a minoritarian group whose narratives threaten the dominant structures of colonial, heteronormative patriarchy – it exists as a call towards decolonization, a possibility for an alternate structure, but also a warning to those who allowed for the violence in the first place.

Morrill et. al present a view of haunting as the ever-present company of Indigenous peoples on lands that had been stolen from them through the speech of Chief Seattle as follows:

There is no place in this country where a man can be alone. At night when the streets of your town and cities are quiet, and you think they are empty, they will throng with the returning spirits that once thronged them, and that still love those places. The white man will never be alone...The dead have power too.⁸

It is this haunting that the red dresses hanging before public institutions incites. The material haunting introduced in *Facsimile* extends in *The REDress Project* to a political platform: the work first took place as a call to political action in public spaces such as York University and the Manitoba Legislature before manifesting within gallery spaces. The act of “putting on the red dress” in mourning, anger and action becomes completely accessible in their installation – where *Facsimile* requires a complex analysis to unpack, *The REDress Project* immediately draws an affectual connection to the empty dress in the viewer. The dresses deliberately hang above

⁸ Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, Super Futures Haunt Collective. “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It.” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 12, no.1 (2016): 4-5.

standing level in installation; just high enough for the viewer to believe they are being watched. Each garment is cut differently from the next, evoking differing ideas around who may have worn them. Crimson hues unite them, returning their beholding to the violence that incited the project. As project organizer Kanisha Brown-Bear states: “Red is such an important colour to our culture, it’s part of the four colours [of the medicine wheel], it’s the colour of blood, it’s something that ties us all together.”⁹ From the boundedness that the colour red exhumes, a subject who haunts the garment appears and the viewer is drawn in to mourn them.

When reviewing the project’s situation at York University, Elizabeth Brulé speaks to the involvement that occurred on campus nearly immediately: the installation of the dresses alone formed a network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples working toward the larger goal of decolonization, along with speakers who worked to fill up the red dresses at the opening ceremony of the work.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the affect of the mourning dresses pulled these networks together for the purpose of a potential becoming.

The REDress Project stands opposed to *Facsimile*’s material obfuscation – rather than using abstraction to haunt into a becoming, *The REDress Project* uses its pure absence to make a mass existence visible. Truly embodying Derrida’s definition, the bodies the red dresses once contained haunt the viewer without an entrance into the sensuous possible. At the risk of overusing Avery Gordon’s adage, *The REDress Project* works specifically to make absence visible. Delicately fluttering dresses make invisibility matter, a direct attack on the purview of Canadian politics and legislature.

⁹ Kanisha Brown-Bear, “The REDress Project: York University” Youtube video, 0:59, posted by “YorkU Student Life” March 1, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4OjrHJgQYY>

¹⁰ Elizabeth Brulé, “The REDress project: Casting an indigenous feminist worldview on sexual violence prevention and education programs in Ontario’s universities” *Studies in Social Justice* 12 no.2 (2018). 339.

Haunting is a phenomenon that allows for a manifested presence of the purposefully absented. *Facsimile* and *The REDress Project* allow for a spectre to appear in the space that is left for them. Abstraction in *Facsimile* and corporeal absence in *The REDress Project* the haunting subjects move from their former place in the periphery to the central visual plane. The works materialize forgotten bodies through their calls to action, forcing the viewer to bear witness to a becoming that upsets a preconceived notion of governance. The collective mourning that each work allows becomes a space for spectres to materialize, to call out to their witnesses. As Eve Tuck so elegantly articulates: “Haunting... is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation.”¹¹ *Facsimile* and *The REDress Project* threaten Canada’s understanding of its own history and future by spectres of the past becoming ungovernable, telling their stories through artists with an unflinching eye. We are haunted by the stories we suppress. *Facsimile* and *The REDress Project* force us to acknowledge the spectres that we refuse to see.

¹¹ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting” *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Eds Stacey Homan Jones, Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013) 642.

Notes



Stephen Andrews, *Facsimile Part II*, 1991,

Graphite, beeswax, oil, Rhoplex, plywood, mahogany paper piano roll

62 x 54'

Oakville Galleries

<http://www.oakvillegalleries.com/collection/details/78/Facsimile-Part-II>



Stephen Andrews, *Facsimile Part IV* (detail, Tim Jocelyn), 1992-1993

Graphite, beeswax, oil, Rhoplex, plywood, mahogany paper piano roll

6 x 18'

Oakville Galleries

<https://visualaids.org/artists/stephen-andrews>



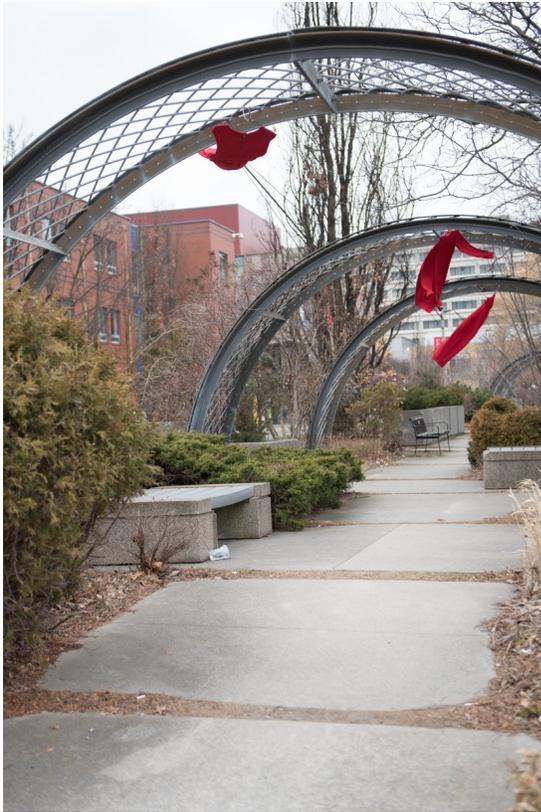
Jaime Black, *The REDress Project* (installation at York University), 2018.

Various donated red dresses

Dimensions unknown

Property of the artist

<http://www.redressproject.org>



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