ARTICLE

# *The Problem with Stairs: Shame and Reparative Ensnarement in the Work of Abbas Akhavan and jes sachse*

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***Cet article examine la fonction de « l'interpellation réparatrice » dans l'œuvre de deux artistes canadien·nes contemporain·es : Abbas Akhavan et jes sachse. Il soutient que ces artistes tendent ce qu'Abbas Akhavan décrit comme un « piège » au spectateur colonisateur : un piège qui provoque intentionnellement des sentiments de honte et de malaise difficiles à supporter. L'autrice s'appuie sur les travaux de la théoricienne des affects queer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick et sur l'étude de l'interpellation menée par le chercheur xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) en études sonores Dylan Robinson pour développer son analyse des œuvres d'Akhavan et de sacshse qui examine le rôle générateur, voire jouissif, de la honte dans les œuvres réparatrices qui s'adressent à un public issu de la société coloniale.***

This article examines the function of what I call "reparative ensnarement" in the work of two contemporary Canadian artists, Abbas Akhavan and jes sachse. I argue that both artists set what Akhavan describes as a "trap": a scenario where an artwork provokes feelings of shame and discomfort that might be difficult for the settler spectator to tolerate.[1] In Akhavan's *Stress Positions* (2009/2017), a tiered plinth set up in the gallery invites the gallery visitor to become a kind of living sculpture, but also interpellates them into a performance of accountability they may not anticipate until it is already too late (fig. 1). Similarly, in the durational performance *To be Frank* (2017/2023–24), the late disability activist and artist jes sachse used their physical body and the existing architecture of the Art Gallery of Ontario to question the politics of access and belonging in the museum by pushing a rented wheelchair in circles around Walker Court, the gallery's central atrium, ensnaring visitors in a choreography of intersubjective responsibility (fig. 2).

I turn to repair as a key concept in evaluating Akhavan and sachse's works: a polyvalent concept that encapsulates both the material and symbolic labour necessary to undertake the work of decolonization in the territories now known as Canada. As a psychic phenomena, repair has been central to object relations, a strain of psychoanalysis that focuses on infant-child relations and is most often associated with the work of Melanie Klein, who theorized the splitting of the "good" and "bad" breast in the mind of the infant—and I will say more about the import of Klein's definitions of depressive and reparative positions in a moment. But repair has also been taken up in comparative literature and queer studies to describe a mode of reading (whether texts or images) that prioritizes good (pleasurable or queer) surprises rather than—as per the more conventional approach of critical or "paranoid" reading—trying to anticipate and prevent bad ones (the feeling of being caught unknowing or unaware, especially when subject to power) in the scholarship of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and José Esteban Muñoz. As a verb, reparation also opens up opportunities for tangible forms of restitution by the colonial state, world-building by the (formerly) colonized, and the return to worlds destroyed by imperialism in the work of anticolonial scholars including Zoé Samudzi, David L. Eng, and Achille Mbembe, and has its corollary in the form of the literal return of objects or money as restitution after historical injustices have occurred (as Naomi Zack, Dan Hicks, Eungsong Kim, and François Vergès have each explored). As an alternative to state narratives of "reconciliation," which seem to forget that "conciliation" between Indigenous and settler peoples in Canada was never achieved,[2] reparation offers a more active and forceful modality for bringing together Indigenous sovereignty alongside a response to the climate crisis (as Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò writes), and puts the onus for this work on settlers rather than Indigenous, Métis, and Inuit communities.

Through a comparative reading of Akhavan and sachse's works, I analyze the generative and even pleasurable role of shame in reparative artworks that take settler spectators as their ideal intended audience. In doing so, my aim is to push back against dominant understandings of shame as a painful emotion that exists as external, or in opposition, to the concept of repair—an assertion made by Australian art historian Susan Best in her 2016 book, *Reparative Aesthetics*,

**fig. 1 (top)**
Abbas Akhavan, *Stress Positions*, 2009/2017. Two plinths, label, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Propped*, Oakville Galleries, 2017. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

**fig. 2 (bottom)**
jes sachse, *To be Frank*, 2017–24. Performance view, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2017. Photo: Yuula Benivolski.

for instance, when she posits that shame might interrupt the settler viewer's attention and forestall their curiosity, making it impossible for them to address difficult histories.[3] In educational theory, shame has been more thoroughly examined as an inevitable response when teaching students about histories of settler-colonial violence in Canada: one that has to be carefully managed to avoid a recentring of settler innocence.[4] While pedagogy theorist Roger I. Simon has advocated for the generative potential of shame in museum exhibitions and public monuments in North America—its capacity to reveal the visitor's complicity and "awaken moral inertia" in audiences[5]—he also, drawing on the work of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, warned of the ways shame might prevent repair by reasserting systemic inequalities and historical injustices that have not been addressed.[6] Instead, I follow Métis artist and curator David Garneau's insistence that we are in need of "non-pedagogical" artworks "that go for the gut before the mind, the senses rather than the sensible" to achieve the work of reparation and cultural decolonization in Canada.[7]

For the psychologist and affect theorist Silvan Tomkins (1911–1991), shame is one of nine affects commonly experienced by infants, and later adults, that provokes reactions of avoidance, attack, or abandonment due to the negative feelings it generates. Tomkins argues that shame describes any pleasure interrupted by an external force, but, interestingly, in his very linear hierarchy of negative and positive affects, shame was the last and therefore least negative affect, butting up against the more neutral emotional response of being surprised or startled. As Tomkins writes in his 1962 volume, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, "[shame] operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the *incomplete* reduction of interest or joy."[8] In other words, shame arises from the incomplete suppression of interest, suggesting that engagement, fascination, and joy might be reignited after the initial moment of shame has passed. This is perhaps why queer theorists who are followers of Tomkins's work, most notably Eve Sedgwick and José Esteban Muñoz, are interested in the ambivalence and social cohesion that shame is also capable of producing: especially among queer and trans communities who insist on continuing to find pleasure in things that are "bad for us" (according to the logics of heteronormativity or biopower), asserting agency and desire but also strengthening bonds between individual subjects.[9] Similarly, shame has been mobilized in disability activism as a way to reclaim the ambivalences of living in a disabled body, and as a strategy to shame ableist structures and inadequate design "solutions."[10] But the notion of shame as an incomplete suppression of interest or joy opens up a wide space for art to undertake reparative work, in that zone of indeterminacy between aesthetic or sensory engagement and action which Akhavan and sachse's works occupy.

While these might seem disparate artworks to bring together in a comparative analysis (Akhavan's works are permanent sculptures, while saches's intervention was a temporary performance), they share common strategies of activating and rearranging the spatial politics of museum architecture—particularly the use of platforms, stairs and steps—to hail the Canadian settler-colonial viewer. By activating a shame response in the viewer, these artists hope to engender participation in the work of repair. Moving beyond institutional critique's interest in revealing (rationally, politely, and didactically, in Garneau's words)[11] the normally hidden economic and power structures that subtend the museum, and that subject its constituents (including artists and curators as well as visitors) to these forms of disciplinary control, Akhavan and sachse's sculptural and performance interventions assume that audiences "already know" that the museum is a space saturated with the effects of colonial capitalism via resource extraction, real estate speculation, and international proxy wars. Their assumptions are at odds with institutions that tend to approach the audience as ignorant of the history and effects of settler colonialism. As critic Amy Fung writes, during Canada's

sesquicentennial celebrations in 2017, a plethora of publicly funded artworks, essays, theatrical productions, and public art installations spoke "to a collective unknowing by whiteness…[where] each project reached some cathartic place, admitting: *We didn't know*" about the histories of transatlantic slavery and settler colonialism that had produced contemporary Canadian society.[12] Similarly, xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) artist, curator and writer Dylan Robinson warns that, to be effective, reparative art must not presume the land's ignorance and reiterate what Indigenous people and non-human subjects "already know" by re-presenting a colonial history that the land (and its Indigenous and non-human inhabitants) have already borne witness to. As he writes, reparative art must move "beyond the normative function of the socially engaged public work to raise consciousness, or tell the site's history. To engage in consciousness-raising where the subject of raised consciousness and public addressee are one and the same would be essentially to retell the subject about their own problems."[13]

Rather than functioning through a strategy of exposure to uncover these histories, both Akhavan and sachse reconfigure existing elements inside gallery spaces to activate the settler-colonial visitor's non-visual senses and force them into a reparative position within these economic and political forces. For psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, as for other theorists of object relations, the reparative, or depressive, position is the state the human subject enters into after giving over to violent and destructive drives: it seeks to repair and mend a relationship with others outside the self.[14] Akhavan and sachse's works can be contextualized as what art historian Jennifer González describes as "situational aesthetics": an "aesthetic system" dating back to the late 1960s and linked to the writing and creative practices of Victor Burgin and Michael Asher, in which "conceptual, temporary, and site-specific or event-specific works of art…recogniz[e] art production as an intervention in a continuous perceptual field."[15] In this system, the artist "reorganizes predetermined elements found within an institutional framework (such as a museum or library)," where "signs or elements are extracted from a familiar discourse—recognizable and identifiable by the public because they are drawn from the local context itself—and placed in a new arrangement."[16] Both artists understand this rearrangement of existing signs as a trap for the settler spectator. By exploring non-human experience (in Akhavan's work) and the use of objects as agential actors for those with disabilities (in sachse's work), I observe how "ensnarement" entangles human and non-human subjects. The snare, as in situational aesthetics, blends into its environment or is camouflaged, perceptible as a trap only once its prey is caught within its system.

Lastly, I write about these artworks as someone who has been ensnared by them, both as a viewer and as a collaborator with and curator of Akhavan and sachse's practices. My theorization of "reparative ensnarement" emerges, therefore, from a position of "critical proximity," rather than critical distance, with these works: as someone who has felt hailed, and "called in" (in the language of transformative justice and the work of Black feminist activist Loretta J. Ross) by their modes of address.[17]

## STEPS, STAIRS, TRAPS: ABBAS AKHAVAN'S *STRESS POSITIONS* (2009/2017)

The phrase "Every artwork is a trap" is drawn from a 2016 interview with Tehran-born, Montreal-based artist Abbas Akhavan in which he described the transportative nature of  artworks.[18] It derives, in part, from the artist's description of his sculptural work *Stress Positions* (2009/2017), in which a set of stairs, evoking a "Speakers' Corner"–style soapbox, is installed against a gallery wall with a didactic label mounted above it at a height where it becomes necessary for the visitor to ascend the steps to read it. Originally conceived for *Speaking Truth to Reconciliation (a project in two parts)*, an exhibition and symposium curated by Sadira Rodrigues at Artspeak in Vancouver, and timed to coincide with the

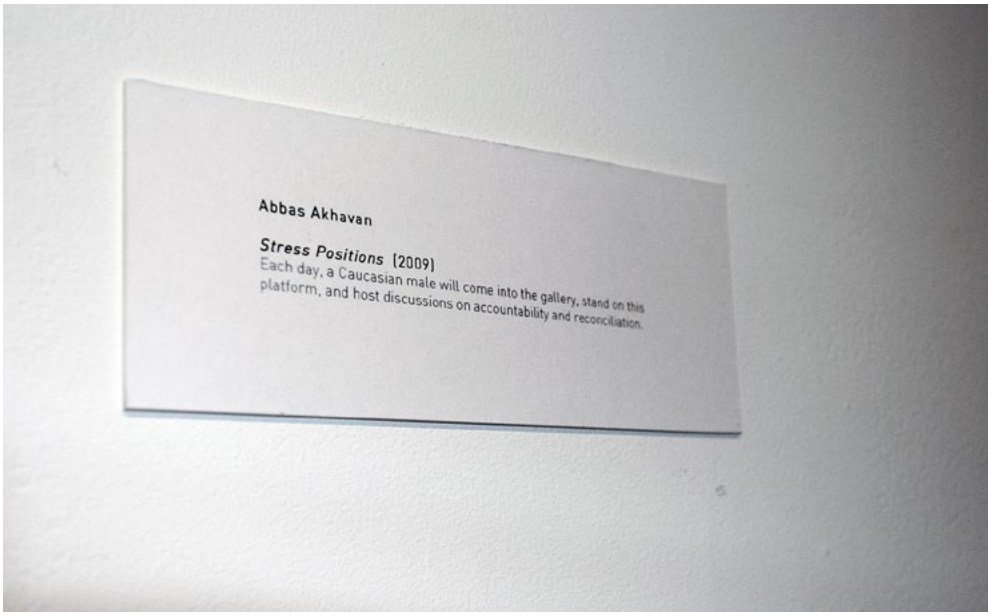


**fig. 3** Abbas Akhavan, *Stress Positions*, 2009/2017. Two plinths, label, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Propped*, Oakville Galleries, 2017. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

start of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's investigations,[19] Akhavan invites the viewer to become a kind of living sculpture, in which the stairs become a plinth, but it also interpellates them into a performance of accountability they do not anticipate until it is already too late. At the top, the label reveals that the structure is built for the use of a white man: "Each day," it reads, "a Caucasian male will come into the gallery, stand on this platform, and host discussions on accountability and reconciliation" (fig. 3). The viewer is left to wait for a performer who never arrives, however. Part invitation, part trap, the work produces an intolerable situation where the viewer is left to decide how the performance ends: either by completing the performance themselves or ignoring the call and turning their attention elsewhere. (Hence the artist's use of the title "stress positions," a George W. Bush-era euphemism for torture techniques used to extract information from prisoners during the so-called "war on terror": a phrase strategically chosen to also remind Canadian viewers of their complicity in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan.)[20]

By taking the plinth, a structure normally unremarked-upon and ignored by viewers, and presenting it as the artwork itself, Akhavan makes tangible "the curatorial *platform*" of *Speaking Truth to Reconciliation*, which "considers the adoption of a position to 'speak out' as an oppositional strategy, and the ways in which this might reveal the limitations or structures in the operation of power."[21] The platform is the only material aspect of Akhavan's four-part contribution to the exhibition, involving three other temporally limited performances that artist and art historian Randy Lee Cutler witnessed and recounted in a detailed analysis that warrants quoting at length:

> Akhavan's work, a project in four parts, indirectly addressed the problematics of race and representation drawn from his own ongoing interest in the correlates of hosting, hospitality, hostility and hostage. For the opening night piece titled, *Ghosts* [2009], the artist extended an invitation 'to as many visibly non-white people as possible to attend the event.' This highlighted a few things: the general absence of people of color at Artspeak openings; the assignment of racialized representation onto the

> viewer; and, perhaps, the impossibility of this depiction outside of actual individualized embodiment.... The second piece, *Stress Positions* [2009]... simultaneously evinces an invitation and its inevitable failure. The artwork is a trap.
>
> The third piece, *Guest* [2009], is a weekly site-specific performance for the duration of the exhibition in which a white woman in full costume visits the gallery with a portable audio system and belly dances for an hour. With the gallery doors propped open, the performance takes over the space, rendering the other two artworks temporarily silent while she gyrates and spins in place. The spectacle points to the dominance of Orientalism in many representations of race, as well as the problematics of racialized embodiment. The final piece will occur at the forum, 'Speaking Out: A Lamentation for Parrhesian Strategies,' which accompanies the exhibition. Here Akhavan, who was born in Iran, has invited an Iraqi artist to impersonate him, wearing his style of clothes and hair, again as a way of addressing representation, ghosts, guests and failure to perform as expected. An illustrated lecture written by the artist will be translated into Arabic (which Akhavan does not speak) and delivered by the impersonator.[22]

The four components of Akhavan's project interrogated the platform as a material technology—its use as both plinth for art and as soapbox—and as a symbol for public speech that elevates and amplifies its speaker's message. This also includes the platform as a metaphorical object within social media, which promises a digital platform from which users may express themselves.[23] While real-world and online platforms are assumed to be inherently liberating for their users, Rianka Singh (writing alongside Sarah Sharma) warns that, "To exalt the platform obscures attention from [other more] illegible forms of resistance and refusal."[24]

That each of Akhavan's contributions at Artspeak addressed race as an (in)visible category that facilitates or obfuscates speech suggests a deep skepticism about the promises of a public platform as the venue for conversations about reconciliation, responsibility, and repair. In this way, *Stress Positions* evokes a history of racialized, disabled, and queer and trans artists deploying platforms and steps to engage the viewer through an embodied, intersubjective encounter. Cutler, for instance, points to the resonance between Akhavan's platform and Yoko Ono's *Ceiling Painting* (also known as *YES Painting*) from 1966, in which viewers had to climb a ladder, perched precariously atop a low white plinth, to reach a magnifying glass hanging from the ceiling, which revealed a framed microscopic painting of the word "YES" affixed above them. By calling upon an announced but unpredictable performer, Akhavan's platform also evokes Felix Gonzalez-Torres's famous *"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* (1991), a light-blue platform surrounded by forty-eight lightbulbs that is briefly occupied, according to the work's didactic panel, by "a lamé-clad go-go dancer" who ascends with a "personal listening device" at an undisclosed time each day to dance for five minutes, and then disappears again. Similarly, Lou Sheppard's *Queer Bind (The Steps)* (2022) uses four stairs, painted black and placed against the wall of the gallery, as a plinth for the iconic pink triangle, adapted by Gran Fury as the logo for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), painted on the wall. When the viewer faces the work from the gallery floor, the steps spell out the word "Acting," in white-painted capital letters, but once the visitor steps to the top, the word "Looking" shows at the viewer's feet, connoting the binary between vision and action in queer activism and the parlance of personal ads.[25] More recently, artists with disabilities have interrogated the ways steps and stairs are traps that promise accessibility but all too often fail: this is central to sachse's work, of course, but also to the choreographic work of performance artist Barak adé Soleil, who

scales museum staircases and steps with a wheelchair and other assistive devices, often with exhausting and dangerous outcomes. The artist and designer Atanas Bozdarov, whose collection of photographs and sculptural replicas of useless access ramps, *Bad Ramps* (2022–ongoing), uses the functional failure of these structures to "call attention to the failure of ramps in general as a minimal solution, and to the failure of a larger system."[26] Across these artists' works, steps and platforms are structures that produce ambivalence in the viewer, who vacillates between passive looking and active response: the promises of affirmation and pleasure offered by the experience of being elevated and amplified hanging alongside the spectre of shame in the failure of steps to provide access and of platforms to facilitate meaningful public dialogue.

When it was remounted at Oakville Galleries (just outside of Toronto, Canada) in 2017, alongside the sesquicentennial celebrations Fung rightly critiques, Akhavan's platform took on added urgency. In this iteration, *Stress Positions* was part of the group exhibition *Propped*, ensnaring the viewer with the same didactic label as bait. In this context, the work seemed to more pointedly hail the viewer to enact the Calls to Action laid out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report, issued in 2015, with an immediacy at odds with the settler government's implementation of these efforts. As the Yellowhead Institute reports, as of 2023, only fourteen out of ninety-four resolutions had been achieved.[27] Akhavan's sculpture activates the TRC not through the gentle didacticism typically used by the state,[28] but through the strategic production of shame in at least two directions: the shame experienced by the unassuming visitor who climbs the steps, only to realize they are responsible for upholding a commitment they may be neither willing nor ready to perform (Akhavan noted that, in the work's 2009 presentation, no white male visitors took up the invitation to host a discussion with other viewers); and the shame that might be experienced by the initiated visitor who, knowing the trap that has been set, must witness others continue to fail to accept the invitation extended by the sculpture. When viewers encounter the work for the first time and are surprised by its successful ensnarement, they often explain their non-participation as the result of their lack of knowledge—that they "didn't know" what they would be expected to do. But as the surprise wears off, and the visitor watches others fail to respond to its call, the experience of surprise becomes collective, rather than individual. *Stress Positions* gets more embarrassing and shameful over time, in other words, as the platform fails to facilitate reconciliation between viewers, and as the context for the work remains unchanged: the Canadian state continues to fail to meet the calls to action issued by Indigenous peoples, and public arts institutions continue to silence and censor those who advocate for the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples outside Canada.[29]

Akhavan's platform points to an ongoing need to reorient the responsibilities of reconciliation and repair away from Indigenous speakers and towards settler and diasporic subjects. It produces an intersubjective dynamic where one must either respond to, or refuse, the call to reparation. Art and aesthetics play a critical role in repair, imagining it beyond legal or financial definitions to invoke the multiple registers—affective, cultural, and psychoanalytic—that are necessary for writing a settler-colonial history of art in Canada. Such an approach thinks and senses reparation as a verb, a future-oriented active process that does not lose sight of the ongoing "liveness" of the colonial past.[30] Following Damian Skinner's call, in 2014, for a settler-colonial art history that uses psychoanalytic methods to investigate the repressed violence of colonialism,[31] I am curious how we might read artworks by non-Indigenous artists like Akhavan—including diasporic peoples, Black subjects, queer and trans artists, settlers with disabilities, and other *arrivants*, in Kamau Brathwaite's terms[32]—as attempts to resuscitate the psychic affects of such repressed violence. Importantly, these artists are compromised subjects who, by living in Canada, have entered their own ethical trap, inheriting a

legacy of violent displacement and settler-colonial common sense. Such artistic interventions might be understood as self-reflexive exercises in learning to navigate and tolerate the shame associated with such an inheritance.

While diverse theorists of photography, art, and visual culture have attempted to chart the relationship between affect and political action across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,[33] shame has often been disregarded as unproductive in viewership because of the ways it is internalized by the subject, felt as an injury to the ego rather than a call to responsible relations with others. If we follow Sedgwick's call to practice reparative reading, as a queer strategy that looks for pleasurable surprises in a text, rather than a paranoid approach that mitigates against the "bad surprise" that we already know is there, might it be possible to detect the generative, and even pleasurable, role of shame in artworks that take settler spectators as their ideal, intended audience? I contend here instead that shame is an inevitable, and perhaps even desirable *affective* response because of the emotion's pro-social *effects*: a point I return to shortly via the analysis of sachse's performance, *To be Frank*.

## CIRCLING BACK: JES SACHSE'S *TO BE FRANK* AS A CHOREOGRAPHY OF RESPONSIBILITY

The work of the late, Toronto-based, disabled trans artist and activist jes sachse used the artist's own body as it interacted with museum, city and domestic architecture to investigate, always with uproarious tongue-in-cheek humour, what it meant to occupy these spaces as a person with a disability. In their durational performance *To be Frank,* sachse used performance to question the politics of access and belonging within the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the nation's largest art museum. Initiated in 2017 and re-mounted in 2023, the performance involved the artist pushing a wheelchair, rented from the AGO's coat check, in circles around the museum's central courtyard for one hour each week, ensnaring visitors in a choreography of intersubjective responsibility (fig. 4). The performance takes the museum itself as inspiration: during preparations for a group performance, sachse noticed that Walker Court, the museum's central atrium, draws visual attention to Frank Gehry's spectacular spiraling cedar staircase but leaves no pathway for visitors with disabilities to traverse the room. While two ramps on the north side offer those in wheelchairs a way down into the courtyard, there is no exit point on the other side, which has only stairs: the ramp is an inaccessible symbol of access that points to the limits of institutional care and accountability (fig. 5), These ramps are, in other words, another kind of trap. The title of sachse's performance is therefore a tongue-in-cheek expression of frustration, and a direct address to the building's architect that imagines what it must be like to be the designer of such a failed space. Unauthorized by the museum and announced via sachse's social media accounts, *To be Frank* attracted a mostly accidental audience: the thousands of visitors who come through the AGO's doors during the three hours a week that admission is free of charge—another measure of accessibility for audiences who cannot financially afford the cost of admission, and who are provided access for a limited duration each week.[34]

Walker Court is also the site that sediments the museum's entangled history with the politics of settler-colonial extraction: the central square is named after one of the AGO's founders, Byron Edmund Walker, whose fortune derived from a career as a banker with the Canadian (Imperial) Bank of Commerce. The bank, like all financial institutions in Canada, profited from mining and extraction practices across the country, but Walker was also personally interested in the practices of mining and was instrumental in the founding of the Royal Ontario Museum and in supporting the geological survey of Canada.[35] Walker Court has also been the location of numerous artistic interventions and performances, including, most notably and permanently, Robert Houle's *Seven Grandfathers* (2014), a series of abstract paintings that resemble ceremonial drums

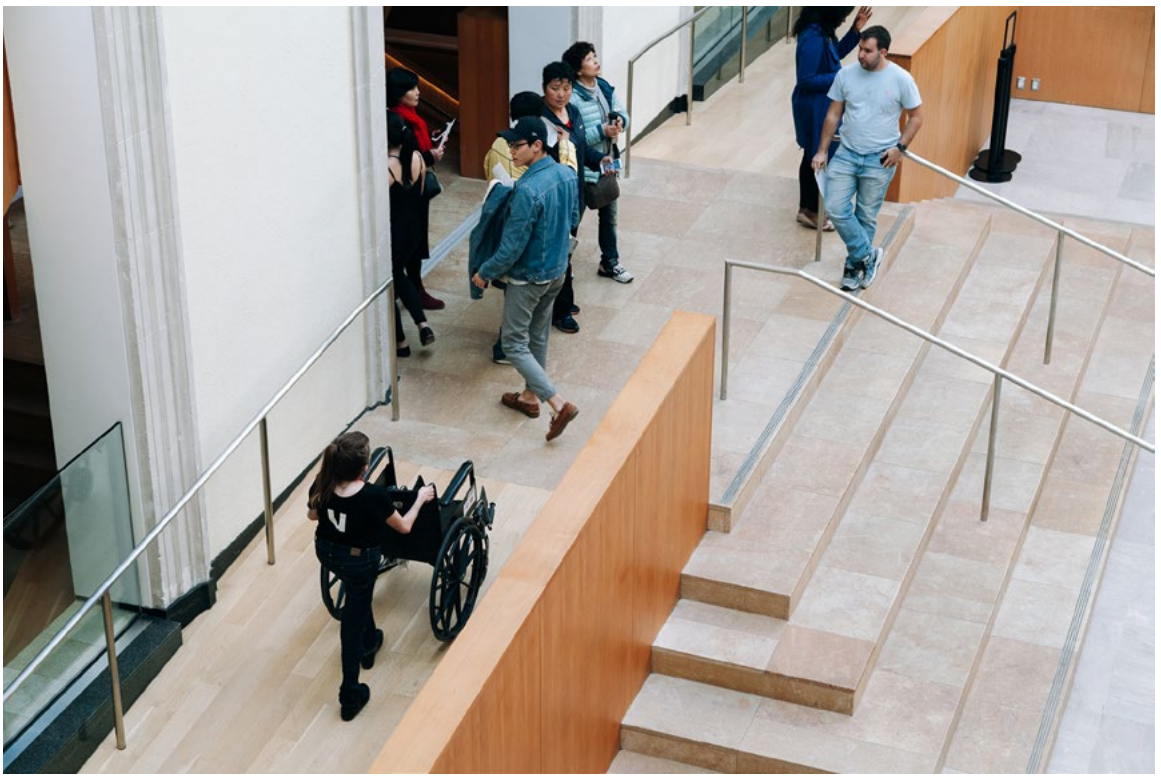

**fig. 4 (top)** jes sachse, *To be Frank*, 2017–24. Performance view, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2017. Photo: Yuula Benivolski.

**fig. 5 (bottom)** Art Gallery of Ontario, Walker Court, 2022. Photo: Canmenwalker. Creative Commons license via Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY 4.0.

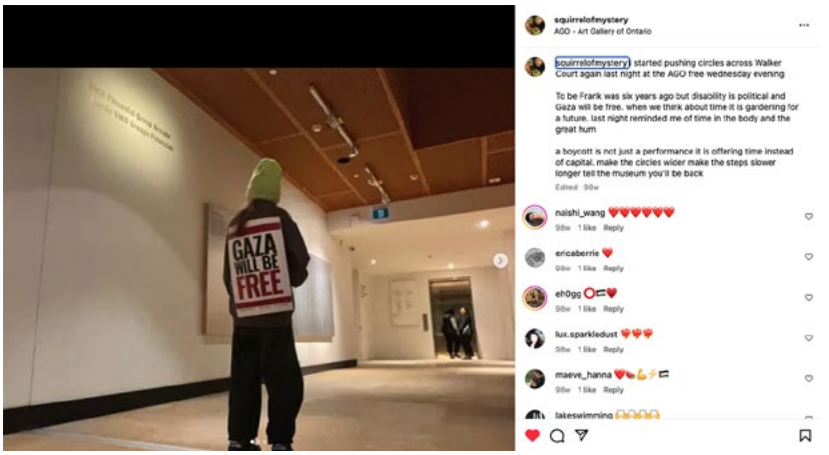

**fig. 6 (top)**
Screenshot of jes sachse (@squirrelofmystery), Instagram post, November 22, 2023.

**fig. 7 (bottom)**
jes sachse, *To be Frank*, 2017–24. Performance view, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2023. Photo: Gabrielle Moser.

**fig. 8 (opposite)**
A group of handicapped people led by eight-year-old Jennifer Keelan, left, crawl up the steps of the US Capitol in Washington, March 12, 1990, to draw support for a key bill in the House that would extend civil rights to disabled persons. The group of about 1,000 people walked or rode in wheelchairs down Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House to the Capitol. (AP Photo/Jeff Markowitz). March 11, 1990.

permanently installed above the archways of the court's original architecture, reasserting the presence of Anishinaabe peoples on the territory upon which the museum resides. The site also hosted Rebecca Belmore's *Clay on Stone* (2016), curated by Wanda Nanibush as part of the night-long Nuit Blanche festival, in which the artist covered the stone floor with clay from the Red River Valley in Manitoba, working painstakingly by hand, first adding the words "land," "water," and "breathe," and then completely obscuring them with minerals from the earth.

*To be Frank* began as a temporally limited performance: weekly one-hour actions executed over eight weeks, adding up to a performance that, in its cumulative duration, was equivalent to a standard eight-hour workday.[36] The performance eventually became an open-ended and ongoing series when, on November 22, 2023, sachse announced via their Facebook and Instagram accounts: "*To be Frank* was six years ago, but disability is political and Gaza will be free...a boycott is not just a performance it is offering time instead of capital. make the circles wider make the steps slower longer tell the museum you'll be back" (fig. 6). Subsequently, the artist performed fourteen times, each week with a different sign, t-shirt, or prop alongside the wheelchair, now draped in a keffiyah, to bring attention to the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza that began on October 7, 2023, and calling for a ceasefire and an end to Isreali occupation, or reminding viewers of the silenced departure of Wanda Nanibush, the AGO's inaugural curator of Indigenous art, who was censored by donors for her expressions of support for Palestinian sovereignty (fig. 7).[37] With Nanibush's dismissal, the museum also removed the nation-to-nation agreement that was spelled out in vinyl lettering on the walls of the J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous & Canadian Art, signifying an end to a seven-year period of reconciliation between the two collections, negotiated by Nanibush and curator Georgiana Uhlyarik.[38]

Inspired by artist Parker Bright's 2017 performance interrupting the display of Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till at the Whitney Biennial (which was broadcast on Facebook Live in March of that year), sachse added an additional audience to the performance by placing an iPad on the seat of the wheelchair, which live-streamed it to viewers at home: a partial solution to the artist's frustration with the limited and troubling ways disabled people are included in conventional acts of protest. To this end, sachse's work drew on the historical legacy of disability and AIDS activism that used the body to demand restitution from the state, including, importantly, the 1990 "Capitol Crawl" protest, in which one thousand disabled activists painstakingly climbed on hands, knees, and stomachs up the steps of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, protesting the delayed approval of the Americans with Disabilities Act (fig. 8). Evoking a shame response in viewers was central to the success of

direct-action protests like the crawl, as was the physical support of non-disabled allies who helped to carry or push activists up the steps.

Whenever I witnessed it, sachse's performance brought to mind the work of the New York-based Art Workers' Coalition, who, from 1969 and into the mid-1970s, pressured the Museum of Modern Art to change their collecting and admission practices and used art to agitate against US involvement in the Vietnam War.[39] Or, closer to home, the many actions undertaken since the 1960s by members of the Canadian Artists Representation group outside of, and within, the AGO who protested hiring and acquisition policies.[40] sachse would often bristle at these comparisons, however; *To be Frank* emerged, in part, out of the artist's critiques of the ways disabled people are invited (or not) into the museum, but also into public acts of protest among communities who otherwise pride themselves on their attention to accessibility. Marching in the street is not, as disability activists such as Johanna Hedva and Jamila Prowse remind us, universally accessible for the chronically ill, the physically disabled, for parents of very young or disabled children, or for those who have intensive care roles for elders.[41] Such segregation of disabled bodies from conventional acts of protest means many people do not know what it looks like to include these bodies in public activism. Collectively, sachse argued, this limits our ability to imagine forms of inclusive solidarity in future actions and activism.

In its most recent iteration, *To be Frank* reimagined anti-colonial protest in the museum as slow, temporally limited, and assisted by others. The tablet which livestreamed the performance from the wheelchair was as essential a witness, for sachse, as any in-person viewer: the livestream allowed the "spoonies at home," they said, to become an active part of the intervention.[42] The political significance of the disabled body has taken on renewed urgency under the conditions of the genocide in Palestine, in which dismemberment is a strategic weapon of war deployed by the Israeli state to cause suffering, disablement, and de-subjectivization.[43] *To be Frank* therefore questions which bodies are permitted visibility in the museum, in political protest, in war, and which are pushed out of sight.

For sachse, the evocation of shame (and co-participation) was one way to exaggerate the politics of visibility and invisibility, and it involved hailing other bodies who shared the space of Walker Court. Some attendees were intentional collaborators, such as the AGO staff members who covertly reserved the wheelchair, or the artist's colleagues and friends who joined them each week—including film programmer Sarah-Tai Black, educator and disability activist Charles Marco Diokno Manzo, curators Sean Lee and Jordan King, and artist Bridget Moser (fig. 9). But there were also the unexpected collaborators who arrived at the AGO and engaged the work on their own terms: people who unknowingly blocked the ramps, every single week, preoccupied with taking pictures of Gehry's staircase, and had to be asked to step aside so the wheelchair could pass; pedestrians who passed by the exterior of the building and were offered watermelon slices on a cold November night when sachse began their performance outside, right beneath Brian Jungen's sculpture *Couch Monster: Sadzĕʔ yaaghęhch'ill* (2022); a young child who asked about the letters on the wool blanket sachse brought into the museum in their final performance; and finally, the museum security guards and volunteer docents who watched sachse's every move, every week. The emotional terrain of each collaboration exceeded the institution's misperception of access as a necessary but mundane task. Instead, sachse's collaborative work helps to, in Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's words, "shift our ideas of access and care (whether it is disability, childcare, economic access, or many more) from an individual chore, an unfortunate cost of having an unfortunate body, to a collective responsibility that's maybe even deeply joyful."[44] The meditative circle sachse traced around the court became an integral formal component of this collective responsibility that *To be Frank* hailed viewers into. As art historian Nash Wong writes, "A looping circle is a

**fig. 9 (top)**
jes sachse, *To be Frank*, 2017–24. Performance view, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2023. Photo: Charles Marco Diokno Manzo.

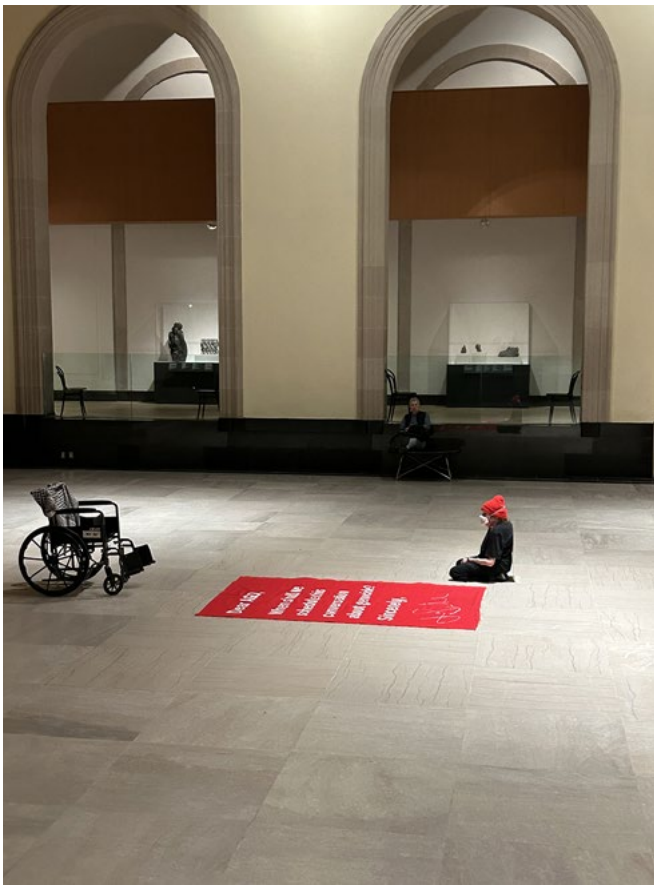

**fig. 10 (bottom)**
jes sachse, *To be Frank*, 2017–24. Performance view, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2023. Photo: Gabrielle Moser.

choreographic insistence on the action of return, which I interpret both as jes's commitment to return to protest each week at Walker Court until the AGO offers transparency, as well as a gesture towards the Palestinian right to return to their homelands."[45] Circling back involves refusing to let something go, insisting that it be attended to and repaired, and exercising a perennial patience in the face of the slowness of this change on the part of viewers too immobilized by their shame to respond.

sachse's final performance, in March 2024, was staged just before the museum closed for a month in response to a strike by the union representing museum security and staff. It involved a letter, painted in white script on a red wool blanket, that sachse unfolded in the centre of Walker Court, carefully spread out on the ground, and then sat next to, in quiet contemplation (fig. 10). "Dear AGO," it read, "When shall we schedule this conversation about genocide? Sincerely, jes sachse." A security staff member arrived within minutes to quietly fold up the blanket and escort sachse from the museum, covering up the artist's message, and insisting there was "nothing to see here." Not knowing sachse's name, the guard frequently referred to them as "squirrel" (as per their social media handle) and suggested, as he escorted the artist from the building, that they were trespassing and that local police would be called. (We joked, on our way home, about how we have both been on the payroll of the AGO as artists in residence: that our names, addresses, and social insurance numbers are on file in its paperwork. They were not a trespasser but a member of its

temporary workforce, and an artist that had exhibited within its walls.) The museum's inability to respond to the demands of sachse's work, or to the many open letters authored by cultural workers and artists demanding accountability for and transparency about Nanibush's dismissal, points once more to the limits of the platform as a mechanism for amplification and liberation. But it also indicates, perhaps, a collective or institutional inability to feel shame—what psychoanalyst Akshi Singh recently described as an "era of competitive shamelessness"[46]—in the face of injustice and wrongdoing.

*To be Frank* was, to my mind, an act of love. It insisted on the museum as a public space, and on its central atrium as a place for meditation, for thinking and imagining the world otherwise. It claimed that space through a repetitive, circular act, where seemingly "nothing" happens. By taking the most basic units of protest—walking, with a sign, with company (whether virtual or in person)—and transposing them into the public art gallery, sachse's performance reinvigorated the long-standing legacy of artist activism in the museum, claiming it as a space of civic ritual, refusal, and belonging.[47]

Reparative ensnarement, in sachse's work, requires a mode of spectatorship that embraces this uncertainty about what is happening and a position of "non-entitlement to knowledge," in the words of media studies scholar Danielle Taschereau-Mamers, whose 2023 book, *Settler Colonial Ways of Seeing*, asks, "What does art history offer to settler colonial studies?" In the book, Taschereau Mamers argues for a practice of "slow looking" by settler spectators that would involve accepting a position of not-knowing what an aesthetic encounter immediately signifies.[48] This is different from the performance of white "not knowing" about the histories of colonial violence in which white spectators are complicit, and benefit from: the situation that Fung describes in the many publicly funded projects celebrating and critiquing Canada's 150th "anniversary" as a nation. Nor is it the recursive move back to settler innocence and settler futurity described by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang.[49] Instead, it insists on not falling into a familiar script of refusal, avoidance, anger or silence when an aesthetic encounter produces an aesthetic response of shame and *also insists that we respond*. I find the notion of "not knowing" what an aesthetic encounter might mean particularly generative in dislodging the settler spectator from the position of the "perfect stranger": the learner who claims they are unaware of settler-Indigenous histories and relations despite being deeply embedded within them.[50] It is this slowness and openness to "not knowing" that makes sachse's work so potent as an act that calls us to a reparative role.

## *FATIGUES* AND NON-HUMAN SUBJECTS IN THE MUSEUM

I want to conclude by thinking about a series of works by Akhavan that offers another, subtler trap that likewise plays out amid the museum's architecture through an encounter with unexpected and fragile non-human bodies. Begun in 2014, *Fatigues* is a series of sculptures, unaccompanied by didactic labels, that are placed throughout the gallery. They comprise the bodies of animals and birds, native to Canada, who, contrary to the traditions of taxidermy—in which animals are posed to look lifelike, aggressive, or peacefully asleep—are arranged naturally and appear dead (fig. 11). Placed surreptitiously alongside other artists' works, and unlit by typical museum lighting, the sculptural works are often encountered by surprise. The supine poses of their forms force the viewer to be more attentive to our location and our physical impact on the space, and sometimes elicit responses of shock, guilt, and shame.

For Akhavan, the use of animal bodies as a material "raises the antennae" of the human viewer, alerted by the fur and feathers, the quills and antlers, to the intersubjective encounters the gallery both impedes and facilitates.[51] Evoking the language of interpellation, Akhavan's description suggests that the animals' incongruous appearance in the museum hails us into a relationship of responsibility

**figs. 11 and 12** Abbas Akhavan, *Fatigues*, 2014. Taxidermied specimens sourced from animals that have died naturally or by accident, dimensions variable. Installation view, *L'avenir*, La Biennale de Montréal 2014, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

**fig. 13** Abbas Akhavan, *Fatigues*, 2014. Taxidermied specimens sourced from animals that have died naturally or by accident, dimensions variable. Installation view, *L'avenir*, La Biennale de Montréal 2014, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

with resource extraction and habitat destruction (fig. 12). This is a history that Canadian museums are complicit in, of course: the source of the wealth for the patron class and donors who sustain our public arts institutions are overwhelmingly derived from extractive practices such as mining, fossil fuel extraction, and fur trading. But Akvahan also has a more immediate cause-and-effect relationship in mind. In his artist statement, he writes: "This body of work, shown unauthored, is purposefully installed in poorly lit corners and other peripheral spaces of the museum without labels or didactic panels," it reads. "The animals in the installation were not sourced from the fur trade nor were they trapped as game. The mammals died of natural causes or in car accidents and all of the birds died in collisions with buildings" (fig. 13). There are echoes here between sachse's unauthorized appearance in Walker Court and the surprise appearance of Akhavan's animals, but also in that both works address the harm caused when bodies not meant to be included in the museum collide with them. Both works have also generated frustration and even anger from fellow artists, sometimes over the incursion of these disabled and non-human subjects into their authorial space, but perhaps also in response to not knowing how to react once the usual scripts of the museum's systems of display have been unsettled.

"The capacity and commitment to accept, embrace, and ply discomfort as an unsettling state of tensile counterbalance is, we suggest, an essential component of unsettling or engaging decolonially from a dominant position," the white settler art historians Leah Decter and Carla Taunton write.[52] A tensile counterbalance is perhaps another way of describing, materially, what operates in sachse and Akhavan's practices, akin to the ambivalence—the ability to toggle between rage and repair—that is central to Klein's theorizing about the human psyche's capacity to move into the reparative position. As Klein notes, while the

infant is only capable of splitting its feelings of violent rage and reparative love into the part-objects, the "good breast" and the "bad breast" that represent its parent, a well-developed adult will be able to move between these positions, and to integrate both the paranoid and reparative positions in its relationships with others. By ensnaring the white settler viewer, these sculptural, interactive, and performance works by Akhavan and sachse offer the visitor a chance to practice tolerating this ambivalent movement, and to enact reparation beyond the settler-colonial modes of seeing and knowing otherwise established by the museum.

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