

THE MAKING OF MEMORIALS

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Brad McCallum is noted for his concern about social conditions, especially those which tear and destroy people's lives. The catastrophic events of World War II, the murderous gangwars in American cities, and the aids epidemic fuel the narratives and sites of his art. In this respect we can say that it exists in the shadow of human tragedy. Yet it would be misleading to conclude that his art is outstanding only because of his awareness of tragedy.

Indeed there are those who argue that the social meanings present in a work of art must not only precede the shaping of its forms, but must have so much authority as to render the synthetic and formal elements into very minor albeit necessary supplements to content. By this argument specific social content becomes so exalted that it requires virtually all of the artist's concentration. But if an artist were to focus so exclusively how could he be an artist, or we might say, how could his artwork be understood as possessing artistry? How does Brad McCallum distinguish himself from the articulations of anyone else who might have as much active care and sensitivity to the human events that he reveals in his work? What is his particular discipline?

An artist practices a certain discipline. Thus Frank Sinatra disciplined his voice, Louis Armstrong mastered his trumpeting jazz, Josef Albers manifested the interactivity of color, and Louis Sullivan took the details and syntax of architectural composition and ornament to extraordinary heights. But is McCallum a maestro as well? Does he command an historic form-making medium that has a sufficiently familiar way of communicating the content of his work?

I propose that Brad McCallum realizes the art of the ancient architect who was charged with the responsibility of making memorials and guaranteeing immortality. The treasures at Delphi, the Gothic tombs, and early American graveyards were and still are such places. But in antiquity the academic distinctions between artist, architect, and landscape

architect did not exist as they do today, at least to the extent of defining what was practical as compared to artistic or who was expected to do what. The persons who built and organized ancient memorials were those best able to do so. I only make these observations in order to locate the discipline of McCallum's work apart from his contemporary status as an artist and apart from his messages. What tradition and virtuoso activity informs his art? What gives it the stuff of the eternal in art?

Let us review some of his projects and then return to these questions. In *Shroud: Mother's Voices* exhibited at Yale University in 1992, McCallum filled a room with floor-to-ceiling length banners each carrying the portrait of a mother with the name and date of death of her child. Not exactly shrouds nor images of the dead, each was an evocation of the aftermath of a tragic death as manifested by the body-sized portraits. The ghostly, semi-transparent silk panels were carefully scaled and distributed to architectural space in a formal and symmetrically metered way like the markers placed sequentially in a military graveyard.

Like the submerged form of a Greek tomb or the sunken doorways of eighteenth century French cenotaphs, the entry to Battery 201 (where the *Permanence of Memory* was first sited in 1995) lies half outside and half inside the earth as though issuing from the resting place of the dead. Entering the installation became a ritual of passage into the first room which addressed the Holocaust. The display case contained field glasses recovered from Buchenwald with a mural size image (16' x 8') of a mass burial. The viewers first approached the field glasses and then realized they were surrounded by the image. The next two rooms dealt with the European and Pacific theaters of war. Each room had three images (4' x 8') representing battles on land, air and sea. In the center of each room, coffin-sized horizontal cases represented moments from the lives of unknown enemy soldiers. Deep into the battery was the Plotting Room which housed the *Memorial Book*, a three-volume tome containing the names of all 2,644 Maine veterans. The stainless steel tables, designed to evoke the sterility of a medical examiner's table, held the books and functioned as their spine. As if laid to rest on the tables, each volume metaphorically represented the bodies of the dead veterans.

The orientation downward into the earth was once again marked by McCallum in *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy*, a temporary public installation in Hartford commissioned by the Wadsworth Athenaeum. After the closing of the museum's installation (consisting of 228 manhole covers produced from confiscated guns and audio players emitting testimony from Hartford residents impacted by gun violence), city workers distributed the "memorial coins" throughout the streets as testimony to violence. Not merely an occasion of a city performing as a museum, Hartford actually reclaimed its ancient function of exalting the dead and providing a cemetery, albeit this time a cemetery of memories instead of physical remains.

I do not think I have to apologize by suggesting that McCallum has a certain necropolitical flair. As he senses the sheer amount of tragic death in our world, he moves to freeze these memories in geometric objects. I insist that he is a craftsman who understands the materials, the scales, and the operations of symmetry governing the physical making of places of the kind we moderns suppose to be the task of architects engaged in solid building. He understands the power of material objects and the ways that we empathize with them as we experience their hardness, details, and dimensions. He understands that we can relocate our psycho-physical bodies in objects in a way that can concretize feelings and memories. As we enter a world of objects we can become oriented to the space and boundaries of something outside of ourselves. We are transported by material things as well as their coordinates and symmetric engagement with the world. If the objects are also registered with inscriptions their material and formal power can become quite specific. If there are rituals of dedication and entry to the space of particular objects, they can become the furnishings of a heterotopia by which I mean a discernible alternate world. McCallum's alternate worlds are places apart from the numbness of our ordinary and often defensive connections to the violence both today and in the past.

One of McCallum's means of fabricating his worlds is to make exquisite objects and distribute or locate them with precise rigor. The materials, the welds and stitches, the spaces between, the axiality of parts, the contextual lights and sounds, are executed with

a high craft appropriate to each article and each location. Such craftsmanship is an ancient hallmark of tombs and memorials in which there is a sense of eternity.

In emphasizing the high craft and careful formality of McCallum's work I do not in the final analysis mean to obfuscate the importance of his particular themes, contents and thus his social concerns. To the contrary, I mean to declare that form, craftsmanship and content are equivalent in his work. Moreover, I suggest that his work is profound and with a cultural precedent rooted in the ancient architectural art of memorializing. In this light it is marvelous that McCallum blurs the modern distinctions between artist, architect, craftsman, and storyteller. Our deepest understanding of architectural space is natural and our empathy with the symmetry and gravity of funerary space is as well. We can acquire and develop our skills of craftsmanship. Yet our sanitized avoidance of tragedy seems unnatural. Brad McCallum manages to challenge that condition by employing his material skills and command of form to help us remember. Indeed, this writer cannot forget his work. His art has succeeded in impressing his concerns in the permanent sector of my memory.