

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF MEMORY

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*...memory without consequences contains the seeds of its own destruction.*

*-James E. Young*

Brad McCallum's multifaceted project, *Permanence of Memory: Maine Veterans and Civilians Remember World War II*, was begun in the summer of 1995 at Battery 201 in Two Lights State Park near Portland, Maine where five rooms and a hallway of an abandoned bunker were transformed into an installation that also served as a metaphorical camera obscura. The piece has its origins in the artist's longtime preoccupation with the transitions between life and death. For instance, McCallum's MFA thesis at Yale University was *Shroud: Mother's Voices* (1992), in which parents spoke testimonials on the violent street deaths of their children. Urban war was the subject in a second collaborative public work, *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy*, executed in Hartford with the Childhood Injury Prevention Center of Connecticut and the Wadsworth Athenaeum. It was not until 1994, however, that McCallum became interested in World War II when, during a hike, he came across the Battery. He was struck by its cavernous enclosure, the sense of moisture ("it was like the walls were crying"), and the eerie acoustic space, all of which evoked his continuing interest in commemoration.

Installed at Battery 201, the photomurals, glass cases, and audiotapes of the piece incorporated several disparate landscapes of memory, some recent, some long gone, some meaningful in the local context, some symbolic. The sea and rocky coast just outside the battery stood for "eternal nature" and all its attendant narratives. The indigenous inhabitants are, as in most Maine places, invisible to all but the trained eye, their traces buried by the plow and other tools of a civilization unlike their own. The 18th-century farmhouse that stood on the site was still the property of the original family when it was demolished and replaced by World War II fortifications, despite the army's promises to

the contrary. The nearby lighthouse and surrounding parkland testified to changing land use, while the graceless utilitarian bunker crouched in the fields, abandoned in its turn.

The concrete bunker's dank, deathlike subterranean ambiance provided an ideal place in which to remember a war. The visitor entered the underworld, an architecture of fear, which closely resembles the architecture of commemoration. Although "nothing" happened in this actual place during World War II, McCallum's use of glass and cold gray steel, of hanging metal-shaded lamps, evoked a torture chamber, arousing the fantasies and associations of a tragic site. Instead of marking a tragedy, however, the bunker contained it. The visitors became stand-ins for those who are absent, those who are commemorated.

In a series of chambers, McCallum placed objects ("souvenirs" recovered by the soldiers) and images (large, ambiguous photo details) specific to the European and Asian "theaters" of war fifty years ago, including a pair of field glasses brought back from Buchenwald by a Maine soldier who was part of the liberating army. (The artist sees this as the most significant item because it is "a tool that gives clarity to sight/site from a place of horror.") Other vitrines contain a German swastika flag taken from a Hitler youth, a German helmet from a battlefield, a Japanese thousand-stitch belt, worn for good luck, and gold teeth which American servicemen took from Japanese corpses. A Japanese flag is poignantly inscribed with the names of fellow villagers wishing its carrier good fortune. The audiotapes of oral history in each room tell stories about or related to the objects in the cases. The photomurals suggest rather than depict catastrophe, not easily recognizable except for the bombing of Hiroshima. Both sound and imagery are intended to be ephemeral, associative, "almost like waves," confusing any linear logic.

In the battery's former "plotting room" was the project's most enduring component, the affective and effective heart of the work- the three hefty volumes of a memorial book, listing by county the names of the 2,644 who died, a page for every victim with his or her name overlaid on a world map centered by a target. Like fields of crosses, they continue toward a vanishing point into the mind's distance. Visitors who knew the dead soldier are

asked to sign in with a memory, photographs, family histories. McCallum hopes eventually to have every page personalized in this manner.

Memorial books have been seen as symbolic tombstones. A Polish book dedicated to Jewish dead in the Holocaust states: "The memorial book which will immortalize the memories of our relatives and friends, the Jews of Pshaytsk, will also serve as a substitute grave. Whenever we pick up the book we will feel we are standing next to their grave, because even that the murderers denied them." The Permanence of Memory book brings together the Maine war dead in a far more intimate way than any graveyard can, drawing in those who are not directly involved, as World War II fades from our imaginations; to a younger generation it is Viet Nam that stands for war.

After leaving Battery 201, the installation was consolidated and shown in other public and governmental places, proving its flexibility in the process. With each move, the Permanence of Memory changes audiences. And as each audience perceives it differently, so the work's politics and agenda change as well, sometimes appearing to contradict former versions, paralleling the manipulability of history itself. In the Hall of Flags at the Maine State House in Augusta, the trophy flags took on particular importance, the archival photographs were wrapped around the columns, while flags from earlier wars were displayed in old dark wood cases. At the American Legion Convention at Sunday River Ski Resort the site was not important but the book became particularly resonant. When presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art and other museums or galleries, the installation's art powers will come to the fore, and its ambiguities will take on more density than for a general public.

In each venue McCallum has to confront the dilemmas of making sophisticated public art that would appeal to local communities. The Two Lights State Park audience had the advantage of the bunker's atmosphere, and perceived the work in a more overtly dramatic framework, with overtones of local fear and involvement heightened by the environment. The American Legion's glorification of war and those who fight wars no doubt overwhelmed some of the terrible memories recounted in oral histories heard on

audiotape, some of which expose the other side of the coin. More neutral visitors in other sites may have picked up on a subversive element in the enlarged photographs, which focus not on heroism but on destruction. Art audiences enjoy the levels of irony achieved by museumizing (their placement in glass cases) the grisly "souvenirs," by estheticizing the grainy journalistic images of the war (enlarging them and hanging them on the wall), and by historicizing the veterans' memories (the audiotapes).

In this complex and expansive memento mori, McCallum has created a landscape that is both here and there, now and then, in Maine and in the military arenas where Maine men and women lost their lives. Public memorials and tragic sites are battlegrounds in a life and death struggle between memory and denial, responsibility or repression. Memory is, after all, only a bulwark against amnesia. Wars are disasters, but amnesia is perhaps the ultimate tragedy. The closer we are to forgetting, the closer to the surface of events and emotions alike we remain, the further we are from the depths where meaning and understanding reside.

Ironically, the elusive duality of memory haunts even the imposing Memorial Book, since these volumes were not printed, as intended, on paper designed to last "forever," and had to be specially coated. Like memory itself, it too remains impermanent. I'm assuming that the title of the installation is ironic, contesting rather than declaring the permanence of memory. (The reference to Salvador Dali's famous painting of limp clocks, *Persistence of Memory* in the Museum of Modern Art, is unavoidable and probably deliberate.) In this sense as well, Battery 201 offered an appropriate haven, exposing the impermanence of the strongest barriers, proving that war, fortifications, photographs, memories are all ephemeral.

If there is a contract between past and present, as geographer J.B. Jackson once suggested, public artists should be among its interpreters. It is said that remembrance is the only way to compensate the dead. But commemorative structures are often pompous, exaggerated, and seldom adequate to the occasion. Inspiring only secondary memories, they can color or even interfere with responses to the primary event. Kaleidoscopic

projects like the Permanence of Memory open a variety of doors to history and memory, attracting some viewers with images, others with words, some with personal associations, others with form and overall ambiance. The consequences of memory imply responsibility to reconsider war as a solution.

Foot Notes:

-Consequences of Memory References James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

-Conversation with the Artist, August 22, 1997.

-Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, New York: The New York Press, 1997.

in the exercise of remembrance.