

INSTALLATION DESIGN AND MUSEUM AS SITE

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Crossing the threshold of the Institute of Contemporary Art from Congress Street a visitor is immediately aware that they have entered a new context separated from the street and sidewalk. From August 8 through September 25, 1998 this art context has become a secondary space for the site-specific installation the Permanence of Memory: Maine Veterans and Civilians Remember World War II. This project is a collaborative work created by the artist Bradley McCallum, the designer Marta Huszar and historian Joel Eastman. The work was designed to occupy the World War II Battery 201 at Two Lights State Park. As a secondary site, following its installation in Battery 201, the ICA becomes a different vehicle or agent for a body of work initially intended to be displayed within a specific environment. Just as we have learned to challenge the primacy of the "original" work of art, so too have we begun to recognize the potential of alternative contexts for site specific works such as the Permanence of Memory.

Like any work of art, an object, installation or performance can illuminate its seen and unseen potential by emanating alternative, new or different ideas when displayed in other contexts. At the ICA, the four sequences of oral histories that reverberated off the concrete walls of the battery are amplified from four enameled light fixtures each projecting fragments of film positives used in the battery installation. The acoustic space illuminated serves as the threshold to the installation that presents the Memorial Books, vitrifies and objects in the same room.

A different site can indeed awake ideas and feelings that an "original" site did not foreground. Most of the objects, such as gold teeth, flags, or field glasses enshrined in the vitrines take on a museumified nature as much as that of war souvenirs. Placed in the Shell Room of Battery 201 the field glasses collected from Buchenwald were charged with signifiers of the Holocaust. Now the field glasses force our gaze at the coffin like vitrines containing other objects that represent the material memory of veterans. The field glasses increase our clarity of vision into history and forces us to remember things we may have chosen to forget.

While Battery 201 grounded our experience to World War II the ICA sets a very different tone as it attempts to objectify space through its minimal architecture of stark white walls and cement floors. Thus the oral histories and objects installed at the ICA take on a more primary and independent function than at the Battery.

The early vision of this important work of art was created by Bradley McCallum who had the foresight to enlist the expertise of a design artist and World War II historian. Marta Huszar, the designer, explains that her work "gravitates toward researching an issue to interpret and transform content and experiences in unique and unexpected venues and formats to express meaning and make new connections to new audiences." In discussing the Memorial Book Huszar recalls wanting "...to create a living memorial to the veterans of World War II that would have a life beyond the battery installation."

Without the proper grounding in World War II history, the project would not have had the impact it contains. The strength of the formal and artistic design is made truly engaging through the collaborative efforts of historian Joel Eastman, Huszar and McCallum. He introduced them to a view of history that they eventually localized while reaching toward a greater understanding of memory. Eastman's historical perspective and knowledge of World War II informed many of the design decisions as well as giving the installation a comprehensive understanding of the social and environmental impact of Battery 201.

For many visitors to the ICA the Memorial Book that Huszar designed creates an interface between the past and the present where contemporary memory renegotiates contexts of the past. The Memorial Book forces us to encounter the stories/histories of specific individuals in our Maine community. The energy triggered by the reception is harnessed by the invitation to relatives and friends of the fallen soldiers to record their memories on the pages of the Book. The voices we hear from the Memorial Book volumes are that of the surviving families and friends of the veterans. In an interview

with Karen Kitchen, Huszar outlines the Memorial Book's design parameters and her creative process:

"The Memorial Book had to engage the participants in the act of placing and leaving memorabilia on a page as well as to reveal and express their feelings for the loss of their loved ones in written form. The size of the pages needed to be large enough for many entries and to command a presence emphasizing the magnitude of loss as well as mapping the past. My formal decisions were influenced by the research I did on military identifiers such as dog tag numbers, military maps from World War II, all kinds of weather and topographic maps of the theatres of war, maps of Maine and the symbols and visual navigational languages utilized in mapping. Lines of site were conveyed along with the visual language of family trees. We also wanted the books to identify with grieving on a universal level, the cathartic human experience of the loss of loved ones through human destruction. When we turn a page we are conscious of this act. The pages are so large that the pace is necessarily slow and ponderous. A sense of timelessness ensues as we search for the name and number that identifies our loved one or as we read the messages and memories left by others."

The Memorial Book in the ICA is an excellent foil for the oral histories and the sterile and cold museumified objects of remembrance. The Book engages us in a different way than the war booty, a way that ultimately forces us to participate.