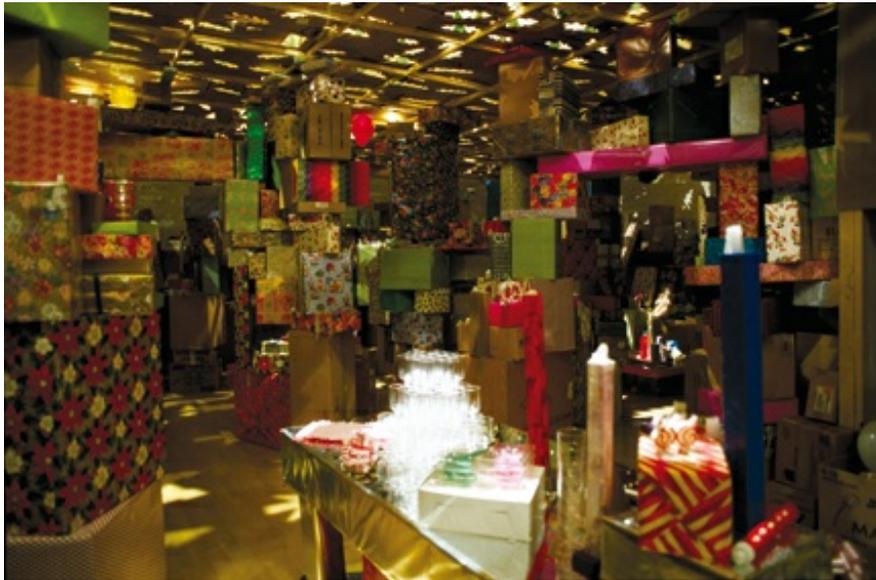


## Dossier | BGL: Precarious and Revealing Sites of Memory

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BGL, à l'abri des arbres, 2001. Photo: © Richard-Max Tremblay, courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

### **BGL: Precarious and Revealing Sites of Memory**

**By Marie-Ève Charron**

Although the notion of celebration touches on a great number of issues, those having to do with memorials are particularly complex. By virtue of their capacity to transform memory into stone, to petrify a fragment of the past in order to make it visible to a number of people and thereby to partake in the construction of their collective identity, memorials highlight the work of selection and, by the same token, reveal the necessity of consensual choice in such matters. What should we keep from the past? What should we safeguard from oblivion? And, as a result, what should we preserve for future generations, as the foundation of our future actions?

Such questions have arisen over the past few decades in the context of what French historian Pierre Nora has termed a “commemorative bulimia” and its transformation into the “duty to remember.” In his book in which he studies “sites of memory,”<sup>(1)</sup> Nora observes that there is now a proliferation of commemorative events and objects of celebration, a tendency which has been accompanied by the belief that the future appears bleak. One of the consequences of such a phenomenon is that a “war of memories” is being waged between communities; it is indeed not uncommon for such groups to evoke the horrors of

the past—be they part of actual experience or of a present set of claims—as a means to gain attention for their cause and to argue for its importance. (2) Thus, it would seem that we have reached a “political age of memory.”(3)

The 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City in 2008 revealed the “knot” that such celebrations of the past can give rise to. (4) Although the case of Quebec City is not directly linked to the crystallization of memory into stone, the event fostered certain political or ideological differences, thereby impeding the unification of the population around a single vision of the past. Acts of memory or of celebration can take shape by means of symbols or emblems, as Nora suggests in his broad definition of sites of memory. Be it as it may, the absence of consensus around a vision of the past proves the inexorable logic of exclusion that drives the notion of memorials. And when, in order to avoid division, commemorative events are not conceived around a clear choice they paradoxically become exercises in amnesia. As a result, they generate even more suspicion, insofar as they are soon reduced to becoming the sheer expression of the mercantile interests of the entertainment industry—which feeds only on the now.

Contemporary art is replete with works that critically address the question of memorials and the latter’s relations to the work of memory, despite the fact that such works are not sites of memory per se (like monuments or buildings that celebrate specific events, such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin by American architect Daniel Libeskind). Moreover, such contemporary artworks reveal the universal or community-oriented pretensions of the aforementioned types of commemorative activity. It is in this light that I would like to examine the work of the Quebec City-based collective BGL.

### **A Unifying Green Discourse**

The BGL collective is made up of Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère and Nicolas Laverdière. It has been producing works that recurrently—albeit indirectly—address the theme of memory by staging situations and objects that either no longer exist or are slowly disappearing in light of the increasing commodification and exploitation of nature. For example, *Jouet d’adulte* (“Adult Toy,” 2003) is a work comprised of a quad pierced by arrows and leaking all its oil. *Venise* (“Venice,” 2004) is made up of a pivoting stuffed moose that functions as a turnstile at the entrance of a shopping centre. Both these works reference the notion of endangered species while parodying male symbols of consumption or a certain utilitarian type of recycling.

It is tempting, moreover, to regard some of the collective’s works as ephemeral memorials, as in the cathedral in *Se réunir Seul* (“To Assemble Alone,” 1999) (5) and the abandoned house in *Villa des regrets* (“Villa of Regrets,” 1999), (6) two works in which the use of fragile materials expose the irremediable disappearance of sites constructed out of wood and paper. The cathedral, which is a space of celebration based on the repetition of rites, is but a façade with a rose window and ogival-shaped windows. The interior of the sacred space appears much like a desolate cinema that shows a sinister parking lot. The villa in *Villa des*

regrets, a typical suburban dwelling, is hollow if only better to fit in with the cornfield in which it is placed. Ultimately, it is the negative side of an individualist lifestyle that is made possible thanks to the standardisation of the means of mass production, including those of the agricultural sector.

In these two cases, the trio presents the torments of modern life and the obsolescence of a past age. By exposing disasters engendered by the passage of time, these installations invite the spectator to reminisce about depleted resources, about a certain harmony that has disappeared along with nature, about a loss of authenticity. BGL thus presents clear visions of bygone things in front of which the beholder can pause and reflect for a moment, much like in a sanctuary, before becoming aware both of the distance that separates him or her from that which is being seen, and of broken bonds or of the impossibility of restoring them. Despite the fact that such visions are clear, they are nonetheless made of wood or paper; thus, they too are ephemeral. These installations function according to the logic of anti-monuments, for they do not impose authoritative certainties onto the spectator; rather, they give rise to temporary affirmations of the work of memory. Paper memorials fabricate a past.

À l'abri des arbres ("Sheltered from the Trees," 2001) (7) is not doubt BGL's most relevant installation in this respect. It addresses such questions with an unprecedented acuity, which is largely due to the intensity of the spectator's experience as well as to the complexity of the installation's construction of time. The installation, a torturous trek through an architectural space made out of used or recycled cardboard and paper, allows the beholder to lose sight of the white cube of the museum in which it is constructed. The spectator begins his or her walk throughout this immersive work in an anonymous looking office, which leads to a neutral hallway that opens onto what seems to be a storage space. A few sparse objects intimate what is to follow: a large banqueting hall housing countless gifts wrapped in colourful, shiny paper.

The glimmer of lights that permeates this space suggests a sense of sumptuousness and opulence. The table is apparently set for an exceptional celebration. The next room also gives off this same impression of abundance; there, the spectator can climb a set of stairs that lead to a dark space with a set of narrow windows through which one can behold a dense evergreen forest. But it is precisely at this moment that one's amazement and awe is to cease, for the artifice that underpins one's experience of the work is suddenly unmasked. Indeed, from this vantage point one can now see the mirror that ceaselessly multiplies the forest; the recycled cardboard out of which the trees are made; the fragile architectural frame that is supported by the uneven columns of gift boxes; the cheap glossy paper which, among other things, has successfully dazzled the beholder, thereby dissimulating the meagre means that underlie the entire work.

The party is indeed over and the guests have already departed. What the spectator is in the process of discovering with a certain sense of unease is that he or she is the witness of a bygone event and that perhaps no one has awaited his or her arrival. In fact, the effacement of the beholder's reflection throughout his or her trek, which was achieved by means of a shrewd trompe-l'œil effect, had already intimated that he or she was trespassing. But had the spectator not been privy to the spectacle while he or she was underground, under the trees whose shapes were cut out from the cardboard ceiling, thereby providing a source of light?

These components of the work suggest that the artists have perhaps transposed the vanitas genre into the language of installation art, (8) as the ephemeral nature of earthly possessions and the decay of material objects in fact echo notions of human finitude and death. Although the installation does touch on these issues related to the human condition, it seems that it also bears a message pertaining to ecological matters. For as the spectator passes from one space to another (i.e., from the piles of gifts on the ground floor to the span of evergreens located on the second floor) each spatial universe is perceived in its own terms, before being associated to one another in light of the final experience of the forest. The accumulation of wealth, or even overconsumption, are made possible then by means of the exploitation of the evergreens. The ceiling made up of cut-outs exhibits a negative image of such a state of affairs: it is as if one were viewing an instance of abusive deforestation. (9)

The "party" theme in the "underground" portion of the work, which literally places the beholder in a space that is "sheltered from the trees," is both an allegory of a lifestyle based on material abundance (with its illusory sense of comfort), as well as the representation of a celebration dedicated to the natural resources that had to be exploited for the party to take place and whose disappearance is thereby intimated. BGL thus speaks from a point of view within general ecological discourse, a discourse that gives rise to consensus and to a form of universalism and in which overproduction is linked to the degradation of the Earth. By virtue of its ephemeral nature, the installation (which was destroyed after the exhibition, never to be reconstructed) does, however, operate like a monument that is not yet erected, but which would function as an anticipated memorial to a key issue: a global catastrophe in which the majestic character of forests is but a mirage.

Much like a pilgrimage, the beholder's spatiotemporal excursion in the installation allows him or her to experience the progressive unveiling of a certain vision of reality. As such, the work can be compared to one of the functions of memorials: that of revalidating a certain reading of the past, even if the past contains unbearable horrors. As for the subject matter chosen by BGL, it may potentially lend itself to consensus, for it constructs a universal vision that aspires to being communicated to and shared by all humans. The work's distanced vision of the past and its anticipated vision of the future, which become visible to those who

move through the space, transform the spectator into a witness and potential subject of the very continuity of the human species. Here, the beholder's memory bears the burden of transmitting this message by means of one's capacity for actualisation.

In light of the fact that hyper-consumption plunges human beings into a senseless, forward-looking escape that is characterized by the constant renewal and acceleration of needs, and in the face of the logic of the now that governs post-industrial societies' relation to time, the installation *À l'abri des arbres* attempts to achieve a point of stasis, a locus of memory constructed out of cardboard and paper that invites one to evaluate what has perhaps already been lost. Ultimately, the installation ends with an exact replica of the office that had initially welcomed the viewer, thereby emphasizing without any ambiguity whatsoever that this memorial is above all a pre-programmed device that gives rise to an experience planned ahead of time. It is, moreover, a space of administration—that administration underpinning hyper-capitalist societies' endeavours to unify ideas or to construct consensus.

[Translated from the French by Eduardo Ralickas]

#### NOTES

1. Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, English edition ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman, tr. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–1998). Nora deals in particular with the case of France.
2. These ideas were discussed on radio on the 8 August 2008 broadcast of France Culture's *Mythographies*, a show that dealt specifically with the theme of memorials.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Such tensions are addressed by Antoine Robitaille in "Antimilitaristes et nationalistes manifestent contre le 400e," *Le Devoir* (Friday, 4 July 2008): A2. Another controversy surrounded the proposed reconstitution of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City. The summer of 2009 was the 250th anniversary of the Battle.
5. This installation was shown at the Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges in Montreal from 1 June to 21 August 1999.
6. This project was produced in partnership with Granby's 3e Impérial, centre d'essais en arts visuels, from 16 July to 30 September 1999.
7. This installation was exhibited at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal from 8 November 2001 to 10 February 2002.
8. This interpretation was put forth by art critic Bernard Lamarche in "Se perdre n'est pas si triste," *Le Devoir* (Saturday, 10 November 2001): C10.
9. A similar kind of reversal (which also functions in two steps) was used by BGL for the work *Sentier battu* ("Well-trodden Path"), a site-specific intervention that took place at the Jardins de Métis International Garden Festival in the summer of 2002.

