

Memorial: the Silence of Extinction

Dr Robyn Glade-Wright

The Memorial project is a contemplative response to the realities of the world around us; the world we have created. The artwork has emerged over a number of years now, and continues to inspire thought, dialogue, and even potentially action, through its quiet message to stop, think, and participate. In essence, it is a reminder of what we have lost, and continue to lose, every year. It is this simple message that lends the work its capacity to move the viewer.

As a work of art, Memorial is deceptively simple, deceptively moving, even deceptively persuasive. The power of the work comes from its invitation to become involved, and the subtle realisations that result for anyone who takes up this offer. It is an 'open' work. Anyone can participate in the project, simply by taking up a pair of scissors and creating a shape. This might be a representation of a known thing (and over time I have delighted in the range of shapes that I have recognised in the work – from starfish, to kangaroos, to more complex and detailed forms that resemble coral), or an entirely new and wonderful creation. Many thousands of people have chosen to participate in the work, through the placement of panels everywhere from the University of Tasmania, through to various primary schools and educational sites in Tasmania and further afield, and other locations such as the Marine Discovery Centre in Woodbridge.

Memorial is moving by virtue of the fact that it is a memorial; a way of remembering what is no longer with us, a tribute to what we have lost. Like all memorials, the work does not judge or accuse us, but simply presents us with a reminder that speaks for itself. The simple message of the work is that whether intentional or not, whether we like it or not, we are losing the flora and fauna that make up life

on our planet every year, every month, every week, every day. This affects us locally; in the decade between 1995 and 2005, there was a more than threefold increase in known extinction of Tasmanian plants, from 7 species to 22 species (Briggs & Leigh, 1996; DPIWE, 2005; in Glade-Wright, 2006). In mainland Australia, extinctions are occurring at a rapid rate: "Over two thousand species of plants are known to be extinct or on the verge of extinction... [and] dozens of animals are thought to be extinct" (Rose, 1996, p. 78). Globally, some estimates have suggested that if the current rate of extinction continues, "at least one fifth of the species of plants and animals will be gone or committed to early extinction by 2030" (Wilson, 2002, p. 102). The website associated with the Memorial project (<http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/MemorialProject/index.html>) estimates the annual rate of global extinction of plants and animals to be 27,000 species (equating to 74 species every day or 3 every hour), and notes that this is a relatively conservative estimate. This number is difficult to imagine or comprehend.

As a series of tiny shapes, however, cut out from coloured paper and placed in archival style in small silk pouches, this number becomes more accessible. This is the great power of the work, and the way its message can move us; it allows us to understand this number in real terms. It acts as a kind of gestalt, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is the simple power of the Memorial. You choose a colour, and then think about what you will create. Maybe it's a piece of coral, all wavy lines. Maybe it's a fish, or a horse. You think about the subtleties of that shape, as you carefully work the scissors around the edge of the paper. Maybe it doesn't turn out quite as you had planned; perhaps one leg is longer than the others. But it is your shape, with all of the idiosyncrasies

Commemorating
the annual extinction
of 27,000 plant and
animal species



that involves. Then you place that shape among the others, with their idiosyncrasies, their own creator's marks. I can see the little green starfish on its own, and appreciate its uniqueness and beauty. And then I can see it as part of a panel, and as one panel among many. It becomes more than just my shape.

And then you imagine that it (and the animal or plant that it represents) is gone forever. They all are.

To me, this is the great strength and power of this Memorial, and what makes its message so persuasive. It draws me in, with its simple invitation. I participate. In doing so, I then appreciate the participation of everyone else who has taken the time to cut out a shape. In some small way, then, I begin to feel like I own a little piece of the work. It is at least a little bit mine. And then my mind makes the link. In some small way, we all own this planet; it is at least a little bit ours. And that means we also own this issue.

The Memorial itself does not tell me what to do with this realisation, of course. But it is the simplicity, the power, the moving nature of the tribute, that leads me to the realisation in the first place. What I do with that knowledge is not for the memorial to say; rather, it is up to me, and you, and all of us, to decide.

Dr Timothy Moss
November, 2010

References

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Artist Biography

Dr Robyn Glade-Wright is a practising artist, designer and educator. Over the past three decades, she has presented fourteen solo exhibitions and participated in forty-three group exhibitions, including four international exhibitions. Recently, her work was selected for inclusion in Momentum: 18th National Textile Biennale and touring exhibition, which is currently touring to twelve galleries around Australia. Glade-Wright's work is held in public institutions including the Powerhouse Gallery, Sydney; the Tamworth Regional Art Gallery, Tamworth; the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart; and the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston. Glade-Wright's current research interests focus on the way in which artefacts can serve to illuminate human experience and function as a means for providing a greater understanding of our existence.



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