Mediterranean atmosphere fills the space as you wander through the lush paths surrounding the select national pavilions in the giardini, you happen upon a rather opposing structure. It is supported by long metal beams; to the left, its entrance is small and unassuming, a door to a shack. You walk inside expecting a hidden surprise, and are perhaps disappointed to find yourself standing in the middle of a ‘Dépanneur’ (often referred to as “the Dep”), a Quebecois version of a convenience store. A woman to your right signals you to get a better look at the believably sparse rows of soda pop and chips lined along the shelves, but its familiar items are out of focus. You expect your eyes to adjust, but the products remain unyieldingly blurred. In a muffled whisper, her lips nearly brush your ear as she whispers one unintelligible word: Canadassimo.

This store is a stage set. Its props betray all expectations; no clerk will see you at the counter. This is not a run for the basics at midnight; this is a simulacrum of experience. Perhaps you are on camera. You realize this is not the fault of your eyes, but that the products on these shelves are purposefully pixelated, like holograms that show both aspects of their animation at once, without resolve. Perhaps now would be the moment when Jaimin Bislodeau, Sébastien Giguère, and Nicolas Laverdière—better known as the collective BGL—would step out from behind an unseen curtain, and reveal their exhibition at the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. The news came just as we were interviewing the interviewed. As they noted in their Vice Canada interview with Kristel Jax, “We just picked up the phone.”

Whether by design or by fluke, Canada’s newest artworld darlings are constructing a dialogue between the current Canadian artistic landscape—an identity they see as being in line with a series of like-minded artists that provoke viewers through a deadpan form of inane humor. BGL has undeniably carved out their own space within this arena—their gimmickry seems far from slowing down and is, rather, becoming more rapidly accessible toward a new form of inane humor. BGL has been part of our approach. We try as much as possible to offer a relevant reflection of our era.

The identifiable slowly slips away to farce. Bislodeau, Giguère, and Laverdière have been working together under the collective moniker BGL for nearly twenty years. Once a trio of artist-students at Quebec City’s Laval University, BGL rose to national and international recognition through dozens of exhibitions, and are now represented by two major contemporary Canadian galleries (Toronto’s Diaz Contemporary and Montréal’s Parisian Laundry). Their works are in prominent institutional collections such as the National Gallery of Canada and the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal—stitutions which the group promptly broke out of by bringing their primary focus onto the street, as recycled object sculptors who have installed works in public spaces across Canada and abroad. Since this departure, BGL has gained so much notoriety that they were selected as the首届 Canadian artists for the 2015 Venice Bienalle without ever submitting an application. As they noted in their Vice Canada interview with Kristel Jax, “We just picked up the phone.”

The theatricality occurs; you are left in the ghost of the recognizable. The identifiable slowly slips away to farce. Bislodeau, Giguère, and Laverdière have been working together under the collective moniker BGL for nearly twenty years. Once a trio of artist-students at Quebec City’s Laval University, BGL rose to national and international recognition through dozens of exhibitions, and are now represented by two major contemporary Canadian galleries (Toronto’s Diaz Contemporary and Montréal’s Parisian Laundry). Their works are in prominent institutional collections such as the National Gallery of Canada and the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal—stitutions which the group promptly broke out of by bringing their primary focus onto the street, as recycled object sculptors who have installed works in public spaces across Canada and abroad. Since this departure, BGL has gained so much notoriety that they were selected as the首届 Canadian artists for the 2015 Venice Bienalle without ever submitting an application. As they noted in their Vice Canada interview with Kristel Jax, “We just picked up the phone.”

BGL: We are always responsive to place and environment. In this case, the physical position of the pavilion in the gardens very quickly gave us the idea of a small convenience store that

Something of the magical and humid atmosphere of the place and environment very quickly gave us the idea of a small convenience store that
would become the entrance to our installation. Also, the building’s extensive fenestration inspired the labyrinthine windows into which visitors can drop coins. And the whole place has a “welcoming little cottage” feel that made it the perfect place to create the studio, as if it belonged to a not very adept artist-handymen-hoarder. You have to see it to grasp all the subtleties and the osmosis that takes place.

TG: There are so many found objects and minute details incorporated into the installation, tell me more about the process, the timeline and the team that you worked with.

BGL: We had a whole year to work on Canadassimo, which does not happen often in our practice. This extended period allowed us to produce a complex sculpture that went beyond us, and whose meaning we are still trying to figure out.

In terms of the installation, we were working with fantastic teams, in Quebec City and at the National Gallery in Ottawa, who were a tremendous help all the way to Venice, where the logistics of transport are crucial, complex and hugely expensive—but where the gelato is really good.

TG: As irreverent humorists that thrive on low forms of culture and art, one might imagine that you felt at-odds with the aesthetic and intensity of the Venice Biennale and the other artists representing the national pavilions throughout this process. How did this conflict inspire you creatively? In your minds, was Canadassimo a safe-space or break from the “high” art world?

BGL: We saw it as a great opportunity to provide an experience that would contrast with the Biennale’s more prestigious aspect. One that would get away from ostentation. Make art simple again. Bring it down to earth and allow spectators to participate. This is what shaped the choices we made. Challenging conventions and clichés will always be an important source of inspiration for us, whatever the project.

TG: Is the expectation of a viewer’s curiosity and their potential interaction one of the driving forces behind your work?

BGL: Yes. Very often one of the aims with our Installations is to give spectators the feeling that they are discovering an environment. It seems that this sense of discovery heightens viewers’ curiosity, and makes them more attentive to details—to particular visual phenomena.

TG: Both BGL & Canadassimo not only play on our conceived definitions of art, but also challenge the status quo of consumerist North American culture. How do you balance this critique with playfulness? How does this pre-set define you as artists?

BGL: You know, laughing at one’s failings is very healthy. We try as much as possible to offer a relevant reflection of our era. We are conscious of our privileged position as both witnesses and actors in today’s world. We are constantly experiencing the beauty of boundless exuberance, which is what inspires us. —

BGL is an artist collective composed of Jasmin Bilodeau (born: 1973), Sébastien Giguère (born: 1972), Nicolas Laverdière (born: 1972) originally from Quebec City. The trio was formed some 13 years ago while the three artists were still studying at Université de Laval in Quebec City.

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