

Reconstructing Art History

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This paper will elaborate upon how agencies of power affected art history during the 1990s conflict in the former Yugoslavia and how art history "collaborated" with the silence after the trauma. Since this time, a new historical perspective has sustained and encouraged the denial of postwar antifascist heritage, in some cases even promoting its destruction. After the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, antifascist monuments were completely abandoned, and their symbolic meanings suppressed and obliterated. Modes of public commemoration of post-World War II heritage have changed drastically and new ways of publicly dealing with the old memorials have tended to de-ideologize them, thus attempting as well to erase the collective memory of the post-World War II period as an explicit manifestation of the former political system and ideology. During the period 1990–2000 almost half of all antifascist monuments were destroyed.¹

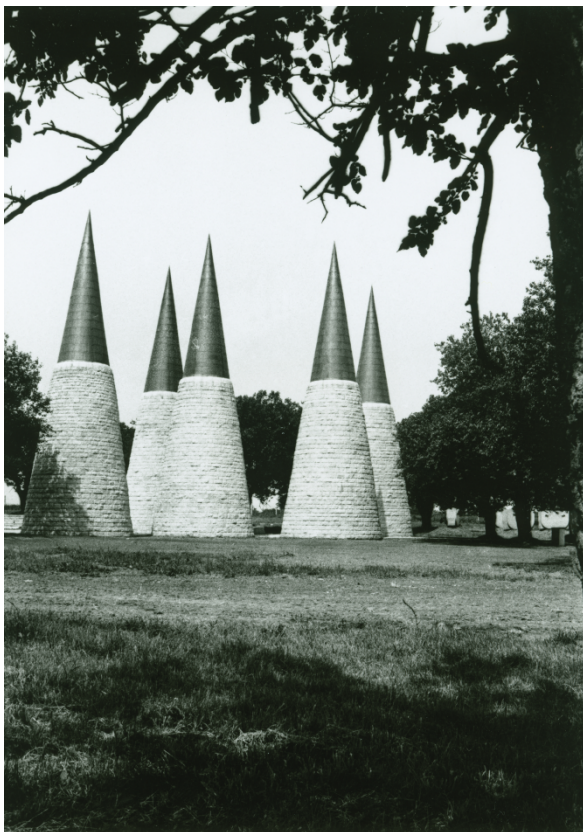
After the recent Homeland War (1991–96), the emphasis was on nationalized, romanticized, early medieval art (of Croat origin) that served to conceal official history (from 1945 to 1991) and enhance this newly branded national identity where new mythologies were created.² The “new life” was basically marked by a few distinctive sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and aesthetic processes: return to national values, ethnic roots, and reaffirming the romantic idea of nation. Heritage has become the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation, a collective representation of the Croatian version of tradition, a concept pivotal to the lexicon of Croatian virtues. This emphasis on sites from Roman and medieval periods demonstrated a clear attempt to develop a national story that highlights periods of Croatian autonomy and resistance to outsiders despite the very recent origins of the present Croatian sovereign state.³

During the recent decade a slow process of antifascist monument renovation was begun, but only around 100 monuments have been restored, that is, 3 percent of the total number. Due to the number of requests for the removal of antifascist memorials from the National Register of Monuments, the Ministry of Culture proposed changing the term “antifascist heritage” to “war heritage” and also removing it from the National Register to list it as a separate category. This attempt is an apparent example of the reconstruction of a new collective identity based on denial of the postwar (antifascist) legacy and history. Unfortunately, this initiative was supported by art historians working for the ministry, demonstrating that antifascism exists in word only, without a systematic politics of memory of genocide or a national partisan movement.

Antifascist memorials were devoid of any symbols of communism or other ideologies, and refreshingly different from the monumental, figurative vocabulary of Socialist Realism.⁴ They were devoted primarily to the victims of the war, and not to heroes or events. These monuments possessed a strong communicative and educational value that attracted millions of visitors every year. Such was the case with the work of one of the most famous ex-Yugoslav architects, Bogdan Bogdanović, whose numerous unique memorial sites have always been developed out of the topography and landscape as places of thinking, recollection, and contemplation, thus not being conceptualized exclusively as aesthetic objects (Figs. 1–3).



1 Bogdan Bodanović,
Partisan memorial, Mostar, 1965 (photograph: Archiv/Sammlung, Architekturzentrum,
Vienna)

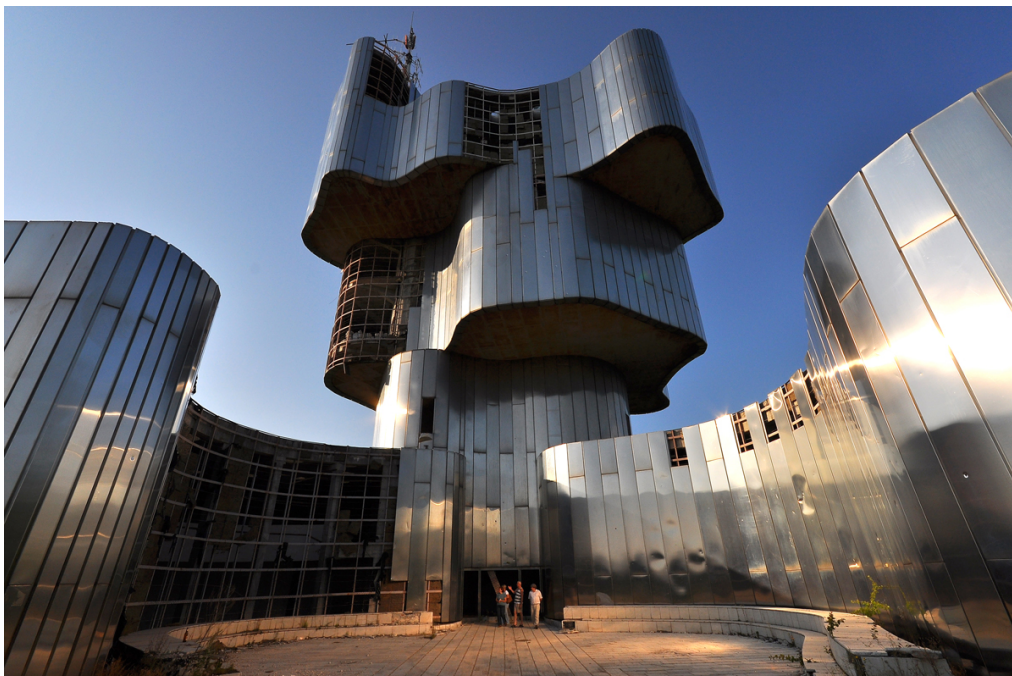


2 Bogdan Bogdanović, Dudik Park memorial
site, Vukovar, 1980 (photograph: Archiv/Sammlung, Architekturzentrum, Vienna)



3 Bogdan Bogdanović, *Stone Flower*, Jasenovac, 1966 (photograph: Archiv/Sammlung, Architekturzentrum, Vienna)

Another monument that has significant artistic as well as memorial-commemorative value is the work of the famous modernist sculptor Vojin Bakić at Petrova Gora, one of the most important antifascist monuments in the country (Fig. 4).



4 Vojin Bakić, monument, Petrova Gora, 1982 (photograph: <http://arteist.hr/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Petrova-Gora.jpg>)

Built in the 1980s, the monument is an architectural/sculptural work, and its interior was home to the Museum of the Revolution, which encompassed an ethnographic collection, exhibition spaces, a library, and a multimedia hall. Originally, it was a Partisan hospital. During the recent war, it was heavily damaged and looted, and it still has not been restored.

It is obvious that during the last twenty years the collective memory of the post-World War II period has been rejected as a marker of the “former” system. The former Yugoslav legacy has been perceived either through amnesia or nostalgia.

Remembering should be considered a cultural legacy. On the other hand, remembering can be used as a means of revenge and hate. Forgetting during the past (history) has enabled faster political and social integration. All these processes are embedded with unequal relations of power, which means that they can be employed in both positive (or inclusive) and negative (or exclusive) ways. This draws us away from the idea that memory is passive; we should see memory as something that we must actively and mindfully produce in conversation with the traces of the past. It is only through active engagement with the present that we can produce the collective memories that will bind us to the future.

Though many of them are still of stunning beauty, these obsolete monuments risk losing their symbolic significance. It is obvious that their context has changed and that new values need to be attributed to them in order to transform them and restore their original meaning.

Furthermore, there is a major obstacle to protection and restoration of these monuments, which lies in the exclusive perception of their significance in terms of artistic values, thus diminishing the whole range of values present on these memorial sites.

These monuments are not only the markers of some remote past, but also the bearers of

universal values that are important today as well. Unfortunately, in all former wars in the entire region, along with ethnic cleansing, a memorial cleansing existed that was accompanied by indifference and ignorance.⁵ Croatia must face its past, including this last chapter of destruction of antifascist monuments, instead of only performing “cosmetic correction.”

As A. Assmann wrote, “The trauma has a special affinity towards the silence. As long as silence is the prevalent mode of dealing with the past, the memory will be used as a generator of manipulation and instrumentalization of social consciousness instead of as a corrective in the formation of a critical and polemical position toward the dominant forms of consciousness.”⁶

The fact is that ideologically divided societies are allowing celebration of contradictory perspectives on a shared history. We need to challenge the homogeneous perceptions of national identity from the inside, and offer a more dynamic understanding of both our collective pasts and our futures. Behind its traditional philosophical components of faith, heritage is at its core politicized and contested, and these cultural norms are being replaced today by openly contentious and fractious cultural politics.

The field of art history has started to revive this legacy since the mid-2000s through research, exhibitions, and documentary movies such as *Spomenik*, which won international awards: <https://vimeo.com/151037590>. Some recent projects demonstrate the attempt to revitalize these monuments, but they are without governmental financial support, and therefore rely on very low budgets and the enthusiasm of a few activist groups.

Notes

¹ Ministry of Culture of Republic of Croatia, National Register of Monuments, <http://www.min-kulture.hr/default.aspx?id=31>

² Peter Niedermuller, “Ethnicity, Nationality, and the Myth of Cultural Heritage: A European View,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 36, nos. 2 and 3 (1999): 1–54.

³ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage—Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2013), 147–51.

⁴ Gal Kirn, “Spomenici su dio jugoslavenskog emancipacijskog projekta,” *Novosti* 670 (2012), <http://www.novosti.com/2012/10/spomenici-su-dio-jugoslavenskog-emancipacijskog-projekta>.

⁵ Aleš Erjavec, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1–54.

⁶ Aleida Assmann, “Transformativna snaga sjećanja,” in *Opasna sjećanja i pomirenje*, ed. S. Sremac, Z. Grozdanov, and N. Knežević (Rijeka, Croatia: Ex Libris, 2011), 195–213.