

Monuments for World War II: Memory and Oblivion in the Balkans and Central-East Europe

Edited by
Areti Adamopoulou / Anna Maria Droumpouki



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This volume contains the edited papers presented at the International Conference “Monuments for World War II: Memory and Oblivion in the Balkans and Central-East Europe” held at the B. & M. Theocharakis Foundation for Fine Arts and Music in Athens on 23-24 November 2023. The conference and this publication are a partial fulfilment of the obligations arising from the research project “WaRs: War and Resistance Monuments in Greece: Documentation of and Historical Approach to Public Monuments, 1945-today”, carried out at the University of Ioannina, Greece, by Areti Adamopoulou, Alexandros Teneketzis, Anna Maria Droumpouki, Kostas Korres and Konstantinos Argianas.

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Monuments for World War II: Memory and Oblivion in the Balkans and
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Edited by Areti Adamopoulou / Anna Maria Droumpouki

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How to Forget your Past: Artistic Reappropriation of Monuments of the Socialist Past in Bulgaria

Abstract

This paper explores the collaborative project *ReForget Your Past*, initiated in 2013 by Bulgarian photographer Nikola Mihov on the basis of his photographic series *Forget Your Past* (2012), an artistic study of Bulgaria's monumental heritage from the socialist era. In *Reforget your Past*, Mihov invited more than thirty artists to reinterpret the representations of these monuments through their own practices ranging from digital manipulations to interventions in public space. Based on this case study, this article aims to examine the discourses generated by these artistic productions around monumental heritage, arguing that they can actively participate in shaping societal discussions on recent memory and its perception in the public sphere.

Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse au projet collaboratif *ReForget Your Past*, initié en 2013 par le photographe Nikola Mihov sur la base de sa série photographique *Forget Your Past* (2012), une étude artistique du patrimoine monumental de la Bulgarie socialiste. Pour *ReForget Your Past*, Mihov a invité plus de trente artistes à réinterpréter les représentations de ces monuments à travers leurs propres pratiques allant de manipulations digitales à des interventions dans l'espace public. À partir de cette étude de cas, cet article vise à examiner les discours générés par ces productions artistiques autour du patrimoine monumental, soutenant qu'elles participent activement à façonner les discussions sociétales sur la mémoire récente et sa perception dans l'espace public.

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Since the fall of the socialist regime in Bulgaria, the status of buildings, sites and monuments recalling the memory of the socialist era and WWII has been a contested issue. How to deal with these former emblems of power in the contemporary context and address the disputed history they represent has been a persistent and crucial question over the years and remains a key public concern today. Many monuments built by the communist regime to celebrate national figures or symbols aligned with the dominant ideology were quickly destroyed, removed, dismantled, or relocated after 1989.¹ Still, more than a hundred are still standing across the country,² abandoned to the passage of time, as if caught up in the ongoing debates over the memorial heritage of socialism. They became a notable example of dissonant heritage,³ reflecting the “lack of agreement and consistency”⁴ regarding the interpretation of this built legacy and its representation in contemporary times, while highlighting the difficult process of coping with a largely ambivalent past in post-socialist Bulgaria. Whereas several analyses have discussed the difficulties surrounding monumental heritage in Bulgaria⁵ and the link between artistic practices and socialist monuments,⁶ this essay will focus on *ReForget your Past* (2013–ongoing), a collaborative artistic project revolving around the built monumental heritage of Bulgaria’s socialist period, which is based on a previous photographic project by Bulgarian photographer Nikola Mihov called *Forget your Past* (2012).

In this regard, this article argues that artistic practices actively dealing with this monumental heritage can play a role in the contemporary negotiation of recent memory and engage with the spatialised memory of WWII in Bulgaria. This engagement allows for a new understanding of how societies have acknowledged and dealt with the controversial memories and narratives of the past in the last thirty years. This essay will therefore analyse the different types of engagement and artistic interventions that can be identified in these projects, arguing that they are representative of a set of artistic approaches to monumental heritage in Bulgaria. This paper will thereby investigate how these minimal interventions, relying on digital manipulations, film, collage or plastic interventions on photographs, can take a stance in societal debates. I argue that through a process of defamilisation⁷ these

¹ Nikolai Vukov, “Death and the Desecrated: Monuments of the Socialist Past in Post-1989 Bulgaria,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 21, no. 2 (January 2003): 49–54.

² Caterina Preda, “‘Living Statues’ and Monuments as ‘Performative Monument Events’ in Post-Socialist South-Eastern Europe,” *Nationalities Papers* 51, no. 3 (May 2023): 544–562.

³ John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester; New York: J. Wiley, 1996); Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, “Dissonant Heritage: Soviet Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism*, eds Agnieszka Mrozik and Holubec (New York: Routledge, 2018), 101–121.

⁴ Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 20.

⁵ See for example Vukov, “Death and the Desecrated”; Ana Luleva, Ivanka Petrova, and Slavia Barlieva, eds, *Contested Heritage and Identities in Post-Socialist Bulgaria* (Sofia: Gutenberg publishing house, 2015); Zhivka Valiavicharska, “History’s Restless Ruins: On Socialist Public Monuments in Postsocialist Bulgaria,” *Boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (February 2014): 171–201; Aneta Vasileva, “Спорно наслеђе у постсоцијалистичкој Бугарској: Кратак историјат и теорија у паневропском контексту” [Contested Heritage in Post-Socialist Bulgaria: Short History and Theory in Pan-European Context], *Modern Conservation. National ICOMOS Serbia* 6 (January 2018): 241–249.

⁶ Aneta Vasileva and Emilia Kaleva, “Recharging Socialism: Bulgarian Socialist Monuments in the 21st Century” *Studia Ethnologica Croatica* 29, no. 1 (December 2017): 171–192; Ina Belcheva, “Contemporary Art and Socialist Heritage Debate in Post-Socialist Bulgaria,” in *Conference Proceedings: Three Decades of Post-Socialist Transition*, eds Nebojša Camprag, Anshika Suri (Darmstadt: Urban Morphosis Lab; Technische Universität Darmstadt, 2019), 25–31; Ina Belcheva, “Artistic Appropriation as Heritage Hybridisation of Socialist Monuments in Bulgaria: The Case of Buzludzha,” in *Heritage Hybridisations. Concepts, Scales and Spaces. Una Europa PhD Workshop Proceedings*, eds Maria Gravari-Barbas, Isidora Stanković (Pantheon Sorbonne; Una Europa: Paris, 2021), 84–88; Preda, “Living Statues and Monuments.”

⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Ill: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 1–14.

interventions can offer a renewed perspective on the past, ultimately influencing what and how we remember in the present.

In what follows, this article will first present an analysis of this collaborative project as a form of engagement with the socialist legacy concerning WWII, before exploring the different approaches that can be identified in the selection of works presented, drawing comparisons with other artistic and social practices related to monumental heritage.

Forget your Past: Artistic Actions and the Protection of Monumental Heritage

The original photographic project began in 2008 as an artistic inventory. The artist's research process emerged from the idea of documenting Bulgaria's still existing monumental and sculptural heritage from the communist period. As many archives had been lost or destroyed since 1989, the artist travelled around the country to collect data tracing the history of these monuments and the events or historical figures they were built to commemorate, and a set of information (from local archives, written testimonies, interviews) about their fate in the immediate post-socialist period and their current status.⁸ He also photographed the monuments, creating a visual archive consisting of black and white frontal images, which inherently convey a personal commentary on these monuments and their current state of preservation, and more generally on the domestic politics of remembrance in relation to Bulgaria's built heritage.

In this regard, Mihov's noted action⁹ already constitutes a form of active engagement with the monuments: through critical and aesthetic encounters, the artist offers a reflection on the socialist legacy and its current treatment in the public sphere, seeking to generate an emotional response that can actually act as a "provocation to reflection."¹⁰

How to forget your Past, the title of the original photographic project — published in book form in 2012¹¹ — provides the key to reading the artist's message. The slogan-like title was tagged upon the entrance of the Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party atop Mount Buzludzha, becoming a symbol of the absence or inconsistency of memorial policies concerning the socialist period in Bulgaria, and its lasting influence on the country's built heritage (**Fig. 1**).

While the monuments represented commemorate various historical moments, figures and even concepts linked to Bulgarian history and celebrated by the communist regime, some are specifically dealing with the memory of WWII, and specifically the entry of the Soviet army in Bulgaria in September 1944. The most notable examples are the monuments to the Soviet army erected in Burgas¹² Sofia¹³ and Plovdiv.¹⁴ But several other monuments commemorate various episodes and figures of Bulgarian history, creating memorial bridges linking the "liberation(s)" and tracing a long history of Bulgarian resistance and suffering, thereby reflecting the "connection made in the frame of socialist ideology" between the first "liberation" —from the Ottoman Empire, after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878— and



Fig. 1. Georgi Stoilov, Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party, 1981. Mount Buzludzha, Photo: Nikola Mihov. *From the series Forget Your Past. Communist-Era Monuments in Bulgaria. 2009–2012.*

⁸ Maciej Falski and Linda Kovářová, "Heritage and the Post-Socialist City: Social and Cultural Perspectives," *Colloquia Humanistica*, no. 10 (December 2021): article 2696.

⁹ Valiavicharska, "History's Restless Ruins"; Vasileva and Kaleva, "Recharging Socialism"; Belcheva, "Artistic Appropriation as Heritage Hybridisation."

¹⁰ Sofia Kalo, "'The Red Kiss of the Past That Does Not Pass': State Socialism in Albanian Visual Art Today," *Visual Anthropology Review* 33, no. 1 (2017): 51–61.

¹¹ Nikola Mihov, *Forget Your Past: Communist-Era Monuments in Bulgaria* (Plovdiv: Žanet 45, 2012).

¹² Built in 1954. Architect: Mihail Milkov.

¹³ Built in 1954. Architects: Danko Mitov, Ivan Vassilyov, Lyuben Neikov, Boris Kapitanov.

¹⁴ Built in 1957. Architects: Boris Markov, Petar Tsvetkov, Assen Marangozov.

the second one in 1944 from Nazism.¹⁵ Indicative examples are the Monument to the Resistance in Vidin¹⁶ (commemorating the communist uprising of 1923 and the Soviet liberation of 1944), the Fraternal Mount memorial complex in Plovdiv¹⁷ (through nineteen sculptural compositions dedicated to “the heroes that have given their life for freedom of the motherland”, be it during the April uprising of 1876, the Russo-Turkish war of 1878, the communist uprising of 1923, or the entrance of the soviet army in Bulgaria in 1944), and the *Three Generations Monument* in Perushtitza¹⁸ dedicated to “the heroes who perished in the three stages of the struggle for Bulgaria’s freedom” during the April uprising of 1876, the communist uprising of 1923 and the resistance of 1941–1944.¹⁹

In different ways, all these monuments were the subject of heated debates and often very experimental proposals for re-use but were ultimately left to decay. Indeed, these monuments were constructed to sanctify the heroes of the regime or major events related to it, and, through them, glorify the regime itself, transferring their sacrality to the regime’s institutions. As a material manifestation of the eternality of the communist regime, these solid, concrete monuments represent an example of what Vukov considers “one of the characteristic features of communist ideology in Eastern Europe”: a “continuous impetus of translating the realm of ideas into tangible, physically embodied forms”,²⁰ a representation —or simulacra— of the promised eternity of the socialist state. And it is precisely this discrepancy between the ideal of eternity embodied in the monuments and their decaying physical state that is emphasised by Mihov’s stark images.

ReForget your Past: Artistic Interventions as Appropriation of the Monumental Heritage

In this context, *ReForget your Past* was born as a collaborative project that grew out of the initial photographic series. For this project, Mihov invited nearly thirty artists to collaborate and reinterpret his images of the monuments. During this process, his photos were picked up by artists representing a variety of art forms: participants included visual artists, performers, designers, sculptors, and even writers. In doing so, they entered into a dialogue with the representation of the monuments themselves, voicing a range of opinions on the political, memorial and aesthetic debates surrounding this heritage, often reintegrating lived historical experiences into the images in order to deal with them in the present. In this regard, the critical and aesthetic encounters created by some of the contemporary art pieces of the *ReForget your Past* project represent a variety of approaches to the monumental heritage of the socialist era and different attempts at resignifying this heritage.

Some artists used the images of the monuments to make room for the representation of the everyday social and cultural realities of post-socialist Bulgaria, juxtaposing this with the stark images of the monuments themselves. Others reappropriated the monuments by adding to them deeply personal imageries, usually contrasting their childhood memory and lived experience of communism with its

¹⁵ Daniela Decheva, “Inconveniences of Memory. The Monument to the Soviet Army and Georgi Dimitrov’s Mausoleum in Sofia after 1989,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 126 (January 2023): 89–100.

¹⁶ Built in 1965. Architect: Ivan Tatarov.

¹⁷ Built in 1974. Architects: Lyubomir Shinkov, Vladimir Rangelov.

¹⁸ Built in 1976. Architects: Lyubomir Shinkov, Vladimir Rangelov.

¹⁹ Mihov, *Forget Your Past*.

²⁰ Nikolai Vukov, “Sacred Chronologies and Lines of Continuities with Preceding Epochs in the Monuments after 1944 in Bulgaria,” in *Heroic Art and Socialist Realism: Monuments, Memory and Representations of the Socialist Past After 1989*, eds Nikolai Vukov and Svetla Kazalarska (Cultural ARCS Foundation, 2018), 9–32.

monumental manifestation. A third group of artists decided to turn the photographic medium into an interactive experience, giving voice to usually neglected voices or squarely engaging readers in the debate. Finally, some artists used the book as a vehicle to speak about the historical past and its material traces, or about the way monuments and the socialist period are remembered and treated in the present.

Artistic Reappropriating Through Aesthetic and Ideological Palimpsest

Several of the projects introduced contemporary images of the post-socialist reality in the representation of the monuments, thereby creating ironic but harsh contrasts to the monuments' original aesthetic and ideological connotations.

Martin Atanasov's (b. 1991) project *How to Forget your Past fast* fuses Mihov's stark photographs with the kitsch aesthetic of 1990s popular culture. His intentionally over-the-top and vulgar black-and-white collages are inspired by the universe and lyrics of Chalga—a blend of traditional music tinged with oriental melodies, upbeat rhythms, and obscene lyrics glorifying the lifestyle of easy money, wild partying and expensive cars²¹—and more generally by the visual environment of 1990s pop culture (Fig. 2). For Atanasov, Chalga and its aesthetic are an integral part of Bulgarian culture and are as much a testament of its lived history as the monuments on which the artist overlaid his digitally manipulated figures. In his own words: "For me, this whole crazy period is perfectly described in the Chalga music produced at the time. I know it's kitschy, vulgar, sexist, materialistic, you name it, but there's also something more complex behind it that has always intrigued me."²² His works are akin to visual palimpsests, testimonies of the transitional period: images of corrupt oligarchs, the former communist leader Todor Jivkov, female Chalga starlets and queer rom singers from the early 2000s are overlaid on these monuments-vestiges of the past. This juxtaposition reveals the apparent contradiction between the two worlds, but also captures the mindset of this period of deep transformation. However, his intervention also underlines the freedom and new possibilities of transitional periods, and the "breeze of change that is inseparable from this era, the palpable euphoria."²³ By overlaying these different registers, the artist evokes the experience of growing up as a teenager in this "time of chaos, disruption, transformation, liberation, rebellion, revolution and corruption",²⁴ when young boys and girls witnessed the replacement of the icons portrayed in sculptures and monuments by the new role models of "a glorified and idealised West".

Similarly, in her project entitled *Bvlgari*, Nathalie Von Doxel (b. 1960) cuts out labels of famous fashion or fast-food brands from design and fashion magazines and superimposes them on Mihov's photographs of the monuments (Fig. 3). In this way, she aptly represents the intervening transformations of the 1990s and early 2000s in Bulgaria, and the new reality of neo-capitalism in the country.²⁵ She also conveys the visual interface of neo-capitalism through the aggressiveness of these images within the sometimes chaotic visual interface of the changing



Fig. 2. Martin Atanasov, *How to Forget your Past Fast*, 2020. Digital intervention on photography, 21 x 30 cm. © Reforget your Past project.



Fig. 3. Nathalie Von Doxel, *Bvlgari*, 2015. Digital intervention on photography, variable dimension. © Reforget your Past project.

²¹ Megan Drevits, "Bulgarian Chalga: Forming a Post-Communist Identity through Music" (BA (Hons) thesis, Indianapolis, Butler University, 2012).

²² Léo de Boisgisson, "Palimpseste bulgare l'épopée de Martin Atanasov à Circulation(s)" [Bulgarian Palimpsest: Martin Atanasov's journey at Circulation(s)], *Fisheye Magazine*, 30 March 2023, <https://fisheyemagazine.fr/article/palimpseste-bulgare/>.

²³ Krasimira Butseva, "Atanasov: How to Forget Your Past Fast?", *EEP Berlin*, October 22, 2020, <https://eepberlin.org/blogs/editorials/atanasov-butseva-how-to-forget-your-past-fast>.

²⁴ Butseva, "Atanasov."

²⁵ Ulrich Ermann, "Performing New Values: Fashion Brands in Post-Socialist Bulgaria," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 7 (2013): 1344–1363; Max Holleran and Fabio Mattioli, "From Modernism to Kitsch: The Aesthetics of Corruption and Nationalism in Bulgaria and Macedonia," *Urban Geography* 43, no. 1 (January 2022): 81–100.



Fig. 4. Kremena Nikolova, *Forget your Pasta*, 2014–2015. Digital intervention on photography, 19 x 29 cm. © Reforget your Past project.

public space of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In doing so, the artist also comments on the replacement of the communists' ideology, icons, role models and their monumental transcription, by a new political and aesthetic order, recalling the contemporary analysis of Sofia's visual interface by Bulgarian philosopher Boyan Manchev.²⁶ Although ironic, this artistic intervention evokes the “long and curious metamorphoses”²⁷ that the socialist monuments in Bulgaria have undergone as part of the attempts to reshape these symbolic spaces. According to Vukov: “Apart from the constant threat of complete destruction, the monument to the Soviet Army in Plovdiv faced the possibility of being replaced by a monument to the Bulgarian national hero V. Levski, by a church, by a large bottle of Coca-Cola [emphasis added], or by a metal sphere, symbolising the sun.”

Through the striking contrast created by these simple digital manipulations, both Atanasov's and Von Doxel's projects capture the atmosphere and radical shift in values of the transition period and analyse the abrupt replacement of the fallen communist heroes and aesthetics by those of the new neo-capitalist society.

Artistic Intervention as a Link Between Monumental History and Intimate Memories

Some artists used the project as a means to make room for personal interpretation and intimate experience, confronting it with the monumental history of the Bulgarian State embodied in the monuments.

In her project *Forget your Pasta* (2014–2015), Kremena Nikolova recalls her first day of school in her hometown of Varna after the fall of the Bulgarian communist regime. She remembers her literature teacher, “Comrade Georgi Chobanov”, telling the class that “From today on I am Mr. Chobanov to you...”²⁸ Stemming from that memory, her project is therefore an attempt to visually convey the turmoil in the mind of a ten-year-old child, who was suddenly being taught that what she had learnt up to then wasn't what it was, and who saw the values, dogmas and (hi) stories she had been inculcated for so long suddenly being transformed into a new reality. She used various techniques to convey this feeling: she first coined a new alphabet, that she used to alter the texts in which Nikola Mihov described the monuments and the context of their construction. Using this new code, she progressively translated every single letter of the original book into her own unintelligible idiom. She then modified the visual representation of the monuments themselves using a mixed technique of collage, colouring, embroidery, perforation, etc. Some pages went missing, while others were overlaid with bold colours by freehand pencil colouring. Then, using coloured thread, she sew some of the monuments to their pages, or stitched them together hastily, as if someone was trying to glue together their already crumbling remains (Fig. 4). Through these interventions, Kremena Nikolova links the monuments to the feelings and memories they evoke to her personally — the first day when their previous ideological context was replaced by a completely new language. In doing so, she confronts her childhood memories, represented by her colourful visual modifications, and the crumbling down of the official ideology that the monuments symbolised for her.

²⁶ “The inorganic is the new transcendence of modernity. The inorganic —the artificial, the plastic, the synthetic object, virtual reality, [...] the images of advertising, of the poster and the billboard, the face and body on the screen, they all possess a new aura that replaces the aura of the past, which is sublated, the divine sacred is ousted”. Boyan Manchev, “Безобразното тяло и фетишът на неорганичното. Записки на един съвременен софийски фланьор” [The Disfigured Body and the Fetish of the Inorganic. Notes by a Contemporary Flâneur from Sofia], *Критика и хуманизъм* [Critique and Humanism], no. 20 (2005): 177–185.

²⁷ Vukov, “Death and the Desecrated,” 52.

²⁸ Artist's text about her work. Collected for the exhibition *ReForget Your Past*, 12–16 November 2019, Contemporary Space, Sofia.

The same interest in personal and intimate memories can be seen in Vessela Mikhailova's (b. 1979) project, which integrates images and texts from her mother's recipe book into the original book. Explaining her concept, she has said that whereas the monuments pictured in Mihov's photographs date back to the time of her parents and grandparents, the only personal memories she has from that period are those of tasting her grandmother's meals as a child (**Fig. 5**).²⁹

The artist then proceeds to cross out most of the original texts of the book, leaving only a few letters forming the names of some typical dishes and beverages from the communist era. She also adds to Mihov's black-and-white images of the monuments photographs of dishes and ingredients drawn from her personal and family archives. As in the case of Nikolova, the artist decides to focus on a very personal interpretation of historical phenomena, using the personal and sensory experiences of a child living in that environment to resignify the images of monuments infused by ideology. This intervention, however, also has a very sensory dimension, which is only hinted at in Mihov's photographic depictions. Indeed, contrary to Nikolova, she does not remember any words or ideologies drummed into her in class, but only the very physical sensations of smelling and tasting familiar foods.

In both examples, the artists played with their own memories to make room for personal narratives and intimate experiences in a society where these elements seem to have been overshadowed—in the public space, and, by extension, in everyday life in the broadest sense of the term—by official history. Although a more in-depth analysis of this theme would fall beyond our present scope, it is worth pointing out that most of the artworks from this collaborative project dealing with personal childhood memories and sensitive experiences of communism were proposed by women artists. In the two examples we examined here, both artists used a personal and situated voice, a subjective artistic memory that is the fruit of their family background, to analyse history and its material legacy.

Artistic Interventions as a Form of Public Engagement with the Past

Another way in which artists interact with monumental heritage is that of involving wider audiences—or readers—through participative actions and installations. In this context, several artists used this collaborative project as a platform to open the memorial debate to the wider public, either through workshops (Viktoria Georgieva) or by creating a place for the reader inside the book itself (Milena Markarius).

In her intervention, Viktoria Georgieva "Mouse" (b. 1989) turned the original book into a collaborative project, working alongside schoolchildren from Varna (**Fig. 6**). She cut out parts of the pages to reimagine some of the book's accompanying texts, and drew cartoon-like characters on some of the reconstructed pages. Finally, she let the children freely experiment with the book, adding pictures, colours, collages from a variety of texts and all manner of drawings (**Fig. 7**). In these workshops, Georgieva gave children the opportunity to appropriate these monuments through play, thereby creating a new form of engaging them with their monumental heritage. In doing so, she also opened new possibilities for dialogue on this issue between children and artists, outside of the dichotomous, ideological and politically charged debates on the monuments that they might be exposed to.

In another very minimal intervention, Milena Makarius's project suggests a renewed relationship between readers and the monuments they are observing: the artist placed a mirror-like surface on the blank page following each photograph. In her interpretation, looking through



Fig. 5. Vessela Mikhailova, *Cook your Past*, 2015. Collage and text on photography, 19 x 29 cm. © Reforget your Past project.



Fig. 6. Viktoria Georgieva-Mouse, 2015–2016. Collage and text on photography, variable dimension. © Reforget your Past project.



Fig. 7. Milena Makarius, *Twist your Past*, 2015–2016. Digital print, mirrors, glue, 19 x 29 cm. © Reforget your Past project.

²⁹ Artist's text about her work. Collected for the exhibition *ReForget Your Past*.



Fig. 8. Vito Valentinov, *Titanic*, 2017. Video. © Reforget your Past project.

the mirror is a metaphor for an “active stance toward the past.”³⁰ This gaze is as subjective as the gesture of turning over the pages itself: when the reader opens a page, their image appears on top of that of the monument, reminding readers that they too are part of this debate, and that monumental heritage is also part of their own history.

These two examples represent two different ways by which contemporary art can play an active role in the heritage debate, by generating new interactions, whether playful or introductory, between the abandoned monumental heritage and a potentially indifferent public. They recall various performances that also tried to make room for ordinary people and break with the monumentality of this concrete-built heritage, thereby bringing the monuments closer to the viewers’ daily reality and diverting its meaning.

Monuments as Material Legacy: Artistic Interventions as Reflections on the Past and Future of Monuments

Finally, some projects used the book as a means to engage with the monuments’ current state of decay through interventions on their actual physical structure, thereby provoking the viewer to reflect on the material legacy of communism. While some artists reflected on the vanishing communist system and ideology, approaching the monuments as the latter’s embodied manifestation, others investigated the current state of the abandoned monuments addressing more directly the issue of their conservation.

Vito Valentinov’s (b. 1977) intervention used a very simple method to resignify Mihov’s images: he added to some of the photographs Bulgarian subtitles from the American blockbuster movie *Titanic*, describing the exact moment when the famous ship sank or the drowning of the protagonist. In the form of a readymade, he combined two, already existing, “found” elements and placed them on top of each other to re-signify the original images of the monuments (Fig. 8). In so doing, he uses defamiliarisation to convey new visions of the past and its representations. But his appropriation of the book does not deal only with the fate of the monuments of communism, but also with the fate of communism itself—the rise and fall of a totalitarian system, supposedly as “unsinkable” as the *Titanic*, in a manifestly ironic comparison—which had a similarly tragic destiny. Through the use of the readymade, he also comments on the shift in the ideology and cultural models in the post-socialist era, and on the concrete realities in countries affected by constant economic and political instability. He thereby develops what Suzana Milevska has described as a potential use of the readymade specifically in the Balkans, as artistic expressions of post-socialist reality.³¹

Whereas some projects, such as Vito Valentinov’s, engaged with the disappearance of the communist ideology, employing the abandonment of monuments as the embodiment of that development, other proposals dealt more directly with the public’s disaffection with the monuments themselves, or even with their destruction. In this regard, the project *Erase Your Past* (2017) by muralist and street artist Nikolay Petrov-Glow took as its starting point a press release from the Sofia Municipality, which stated that after the dismantling of the Monument to 1300 Years

³⁰ Artist’s text about her work. Collected for the exhibition *ReForget Your Past*.

³¹ She argues that “the readymade might be not the most appropriate medium for the art activities in the Balkans in the technological sense, but it is appropriate in terms of the content. It can express the specific reality of countries affected by continuous economic and political instability, especially if the industrial shapes and their difference from perfection are used within profoundly conceptualized artistic projects.” Suzana Milevska, “The Readymade and the Question of the Fabrication of Objects and Subjects,” in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura J. Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 190.

of Bulgaria³² the site would be “cleansed.”³³ In response, the artist used acetone to erase all monuments from the book. But this process did not go exactly as planned: the erasure of the monuments could not have gone undetected. Their removal did not erase their physical traces – instead, a ghostly, pink halo remained on the pictures, like a stain on the landscapes where the monuments once stood (**Fig. 9**). These visions are reminiscent of the cases of the vacant spaces left by the socialist monuments that were destroyed after 1989 – an emblematic example being the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia,³⁴ whose absence rather highlighted the values vacuum of the post-socialist period, with the site somehow maintaining its status as a place of remembrance, rather than erasing its memory.³⁵

In doing so, the artist questions the memorial politics of the government, and explores how these “lieux de mémoire”³⁶ are dismantled, usually in the absence of any real dialogue involving the public, as acts of political significance. The artist therefore takes the current debates about the place of monuments in public space as his starting point to engage with the ongoing negotiations of the memory of a traumatic past and reflect on the ways Bulgarian society has come to terms with the changes of the past thirty years.

Our last example highlights a different way in which artists have approached the issue of the durability of monuments and their symbolically charged presence in public space, Maria Nalbantova’s project *PopUp Past* (2017). In this intervention, the artist transformed the original object into a pop-up book reminiscent of popular children’s books. To this end, she cut out and then pasted together all the monuments on the same page, creating a new memorial agglomeration, where all the monuments are merged into one giant mashup of fallen heroes and glorious events of the past (**Fig. 10**). In doing so, she resignified the monuments, as if they were stripped of their original grandiose meaning and simply piled up together in a de-glorified space, turning these monumental tokens of past grandeur into a source of amusement. In this respect, her intervention could be reminiscent of the fate of many socialist monuments that were relocated to parks or museums —compared by some to “sculptural graveyards”³⁷— where they are presented, in the case of the Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia, as testimonies “of the complicated attitude that Bulgarian society maintains to its communist past.”³⁸ The potential displacement of monuments is a prominent aspect of the current debate surrounding monumental heritage in Bulgaria, in light of the controversy surrounding the fate of the politically charged Monument of the Soviet Army in Sofia. Through this playful interaction, the artist therefore resignifies the monuments’ image, turning her intervention into a commentary on its status and future fate.

³² After years of debate, concerning both its aesthetic and its structural solidity, the monument (built in 1981) was finally declared dangerous in 2009 and dismantled in 2014. For more, see Jordanka Peycheva, “Forget Your Past – The Changing Face of Modernism in Bulgaria – Creating a Sense of Place From Collective Nostalgia and Cultural Memory” (MA thesis, Kingston University, 2021), 89.

³³ “Паметникът ‘1300 години България’ пред НДК вече е в историята” [The Monument ‘1300 years of Bulgaria’ in Front of the National Palace of Culture is Already History], *DarikNews.bg*, July 28, 2017, <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/sofiia/pametnikyt-1300-godini-bylgariia-pred-ndk-veche-e-v-istoriata-snimki-2039567>.

³⁴ Decheva, “Inconveniences of Memory,” 89–100.

³⁵ Maria Todorova, “The Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov as Lieu de Mémoire,” *The Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 2 (June 2006): 377–411; Belcheva, “Contemporary Art and Socialist Heritage Debate”.

³⁶ Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire (I)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013 [1984]).

³⁷ Ina Belcheva, “Sculptural Graveyards’: Park-Museums of Socialist Monuments as a Search for Consensus,” in *Discussing Heritage and Museums: Crossing Paths of France and Serbia*, ed. Dominique Poulot and Isidor Stanković (Website of HiCSA, online October 2017): 100–118.

³⁸ Nikolai Vukov, “The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia and the Politics of Avoidance,” *Cultures of History Forum*, December 5, 2012, <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/exhibitions/the-museum-of-socialist-art-in-sofia-and-the-politics-of-avoidance>.



Fig. 9. Glow, *Erase Your Past*, 2017. Acetone on photography, 19 x 29 cm. © Reforget your Past project.



Fig. 10. Maria Nalbantova, *Pop Up Past*, 2017. Digital print, cardboard, glue, variable dimensions, max. 68 x 28 x 19 cm. © Reforget your Past project.

Conclusion

Using the collaborative project *ReForget your Past* as a case study, this article focused on artistic practices that go beyond the mere aesthetic fascination with abandoned monuments, to actively engage in the process of dealing with the past of a particular society, thereby overcoming the binary scheme of preservation Vs destruction that is so prevalent in political debates. Through an in-depth analysis of these diverse artistic proposals, this study presented several examples of how contemporary artists can engage in debates concerning the monumental heritage of the socialist period. This study of the *ReForget your Past* project allowed us to identify the various ways in which artists engaged with the photographic representations of the monuments, and, by extension, with the ongoing debates about the use of the past and its monumental legacies into the present.

Several artists —mostly women— used their personal memories to interweave private, often sensory recollections from that period with its monumental manifestations, therefore creating space for personal and lived stories within the official discourses and ideologies represented by the monuments. Others used the book as a medium to develop participatory practices, aspiring to involve readers and anonymous participants, and create new interactions with the monuments, thereby also stimulating new forms of engagement with the history they bear witness to. Finally, some artists reflected on monumental endurance in the present, and used this project as an opportunity to provoke reflection on their absence or presence and their continued symbolic power.

In conclusion, the examples presented here share several characteristics, generally relying on the use of humour and irony, or on the technical and formal simplicity of their mediums, subverting the grandiloquence of the monuments photographed by Mihov. By offering multi-layered approaches to the past and incorporating various visions and possibilities of memorialisation, they pave the way for an agonistic relation to memory³⁹ and represent a privileged terrain for the construction of new subjectivities.⁴⁰ In this regard, artistic production can become a form of political participation, producing nuanced reflection on the recent past and its legacies, participating actively in a “politics of possibility.”⁴¹

³⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁰ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 141.

⁴¹ Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture. An Introduction* (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 12.

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