“SCULPTURAL GRAVEYARDS”: PARK-MUSEUMS OF SOCIALIST MONUMENTS AS A SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS

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Electronic reference
Biography

Ina Belcheva is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. The title of her dissertation is *Socialist Monuments in the Post-Socialist Public Space: conflicts, memories, and aesthetics. The Bulgarian case in the South-East European context*, and is being written under the tutelage of Professor Dominique Poulot. Belcheva defended her Master thesis at the *EHESS* (*Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*) in Paris, with Professor Eric Michaud on the problem of *The Monumental Sculpture in Sofia During the Establishment of the Communist Regime* (1947/8 - 1956). In 2014 she also worked as a curator at the Bulgarian National Art Gallery, in its newest branch – the Museum of Socialist Art.

Summary:

“Sculptural Graveyards”: Park-Museums of Socialist Monuments as a Search for Consensus

After the fall of Communist regimes in Europe an important part of the monumental propaganda remained as a haunting memory of the past. Just like after every revolution, one of the first impulses was to take down the statues or to de-sanctify them by painting them over with graffiti. This impulse was sooner or later stifled, depending on the country, and in most cases this was achieved by removing the monuments from the public space and relocating them to what is commonly defined as “sculptural graveyards”. Temporary solution or permanent open-air museums, this is one of the new phenomena in museum practices in Central and Eastern Europe from the last couple of decades. In this paper we examine the practice, but also the linguistic code behind it. The idea of a graveyard, burying, is opposite to that of heritage and preservation of memory. Thus the inauguration of sculptural parks-museums could be part of what James Young defined as an attempt to forget. By examining the differences those open-air museums represent in their museum practices, the question of memories of the recent past and the conflicts arising from them, as well as the intent behind the common use of the term “graveyard”, our
aim is to paint a broad picture of the contemporary problem of conservation of the monuments of Socialism in museums.

Résumé :
« Cimetières de sculptures » : les parcs-musées de monuments socialistes et la quête de consensus

Après la chute des régimes communistes en Europe une partie importante de la propagande monumentale est restée dans l'espace public tel un souvenir-fantôme du passé. Comme avec chaque révolution, une des premières impulsions était de renverser les statues ou de les désacraliser en les recouvrant de graffiti. L'apaisement des passions, plus ou moins rapide selon les spécificités de chaque pays, dans la plupart des cas s'est produit suite à la délocalisation des monuments vers les communément dénommés « cimetières de sculptures ». Solution temporaire ou musées permanents, c'est un nouveau phénomène dans les pratiques muséales en Europe médiane que nous observons depuis deux décennies. Dans cet article nous nous interrogeons sur des questions muséologiques mais aussi sur le code linguistique spécifique. L'idée de cimetière et d'enterrement est contraire à celle de protection du patrimoine et de la mémoire. Voilà pourquoi l'inauguration de parcs-musées de sculptures pourrait être qualifiée en tant que tentative d'oubli (James Young). Nous nous tâchons à dépeindre une image générale du problème actuel qui est la conservation des monuments du socialisme dans des musées en examinant les caractéristiques principales de ces musées en plein air, le conflit des mémoires et le code discursif.
“SCULPTURAL GRAVEYARDS”: PARK-MUSEUMS OF SOCIALIST MONUMENTS AS A SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS

The public statuary characteristic for Communist regimes, for the most part highly ideologically charged, is still abundant in the post-socialist space. As ignoring it or removing it quietly is not a solution, different countries in the region have sought out diverse methods of dealing with this monumental heritage of the recent past.

The quote from Alain Resnais and Chris Marker’s controversial documentary film illustrates the best the principal problem of the Socialist artistic heritage today. While some works of art from other difficult periods in history have found their way to art museums, official public sculpture from the second half of the 20th century in Southeastern Europe is either absent or “exiled” in special museums that would allow specific contextualization and evaluation.

We are interested in the appearance of the new type of museums that are the sculpture parks of socialist monuments. Those museums have been created in different moments of the post-period; they have different concepts and are received in a different way. Yet they share one common trait – they exhibit half a century of creations of public art and are commonly renamed as “sculptural graveyards”. In this article we try to follow the history of this denomination, see the various interpretations made by specialists and try to propose a new classification of the park-museums that exist until now by separating them in two groups: museums with a more or less pronounced ironic approach (Grūtas Park, Memento Park) and art museums with a more conservative approach (Park of Arts, Museum of Socialist Art). A special attention is paid to the newest sculpture park-museum in Southeastern Europe – the Museum of Socialist Art – as an example of the difficulties met to reach a consensual decision and the problem of the conflict of memories. The questions of aesthetics, as well as that of memory, are mentioned, but as those are complex issues that involve a more in-depth analysis of the situation, the nostalgia and the bitterness of the different actors, they are not developed here.

1 Chris Marker, Les statues meurent aussi, directed by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Ghislain Cloquet (France: Présence africaine, Tadiécinéma, 1953).
2 Of course, they exhibit only a selection of those monuments that were removed from the public space. Others, such as monuments to the Soviet Army, are still in their original emplacement and their existence is object of different debates and heritage policies.
“Sculptural graveyards”: preservation politics or politics of forgetting?

History has shown that museums of the recent past whose goal was to preserve its heritage usually appeared a few years after the political change, or revolution had taken place. The first museum of this kind was the Museum of French Monuments that opened to the public in 1795, just six years after the French revolution. Its mission was to preserve the heritage that was under threat of destruction and vandalism, while proposing historical and somewhat didactic vision of the exhibited works. The main role of this first museum was to preserve and to spread the awareness of the need to protect the heritage.

In a recent exhibition in the Louvre, dedicated to the Museum of French Monuments, the introduction underlined that the word “monument” at the time was used as a definition of “witness of the past” and as such had to be in service of the preservation of memory for future generations. In his article, Richard Esbenshade makes a parallel between this first French museum and Lenin’s Plan for monumental propaganda. In fact, after the October Revolution, Lenin had a similar project in mind: to remove all public art that glorified the monarchy and, after careful evaluation of works, to preserve those that have “undeniable” aesthetic qualities as well as to destroy the “superfluous” others. Such a museum was not created, to our knowledge, but numerous royal sculptures were removed, and their pedestals either remained empty or the statues were replaced by ephemeral monuments of ideological figures.

After the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989 (and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991), countries from Eastern Europe had to prepare for the destruction that was sure to follow. Of course, many statues and monuments were destroyed in a sort of symbolic taking down of the former regime, but also as a type of therapeutic liberation from the oppressive past. Some countries had a more swift reaction than others and hurried to protect the most emblematic examples of monuments in the public space. In 1993 Hungary inaugurated the Park of Statues that is now called Memento Park in Budapest and the Russians placed their monuments of ideological figures, such as Lenin, Stalin or Felix Dzerzhinsky, in Moscow’ Park of Arts in 1996.

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5 A more particular way of preserving was chosen in Crimea, cape Tarkhankut, in 1992. By a local initiative, in order to preserve the monuments of leaders that existed in the public space, but also in different factories, those were quickly collected and put at the bottom of the sea in an underwater museum that is today known as the “Alley of Leaders”.
Today, open-air museums that exhibit public sculptures from the years of Socialism could be found not only in Russia and Hungary, but also in Lithuania (Grūtas Park, also known as Stalin’s World) and in Bulgaria – the Museum of Socialist Art. One thing that those museums share is the way they are commonly referred to – “sculptural graveyards”.

It is important to be able to differentiate those parks and to understand why they came to be called that way. The idea of a graveyard is strictly related to that of memory, but also of burial, so to the memory of something long gone and that could never come back. Some of the sculpture parks of monuments of Socialism are even positioned in the outskirts of the cities (the case of Memento Park) so that they keep out of sight and out of mind (just like graveyards do). A public statue is specific in a way that it has an inherent connection with the place it occupies. This is especially true for monumental sculpture from the years of Socialism, where almost every monument was included in a social ritual: a commemoration date, an anniversary, beginning or end of the school year, national holiday or simply an organized group visit. After the fall of Socialism, sculptures, as the most visible vestiges of the past, became focal points for social unrest, mainly by becoming places for manifestations. But they were also a way to release the social tension: they were covered with graffiti and different artists found their expression by working on the monuments themselves.

The destruction of the monuments was seen as a way of physically “taking down” the former power. Some countries, such as Romania, destroyed the majority of their monuments, and today are struggling to preserve the few that were left; others kept them in storage or simply discarded them in different and often random places. Finally, a few tried to protect those vestiges of the past and quickly came to create new museums to exhibit them. The need to remove monuments from their original emplacement and to put them in a specially arranged context is what symbolizes the “death” of a monument. Once removed, extracted from its ideological role, it is now to be seen only as a witness of the past and as a work of art.

The Museum of French Monuments was the first to have an exhibition park, even though it was quite different from the later post-Socialist examples. The Elysées gardens were used to exhibit tombstones and sculptural compositions in order to “commemorate the virtues and the memory of illustrious people.”

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7 This is the Estonian case – today the Estonian history museum has a project to open a Park of Monuments and this is an object of many debates.
8 Press release for the exhibition: Un musée révolutionnaire.
It was a place that could be used for walks and for reflections, but what is interesting is that the curators of the Louvre exhibition define it as a *timeless space*, which is, of course, a term that we often associate with graveyards.

The origin of the ironically used denomination “sculptural graveyard” is quite unclear. It is a term used by numerous journalists, politicians, researchers in different countries, independently from each other. Researchers use “sculptural graveyard” either as a way to describe the post-Socialist sculpture park-museums and their initial “storage” use, or as a reference to the way the public usually talks about them. As a consequence, it is not rare to see tourist websites, such as Trip Advisor, to describe the Moscow park-museum or the Museum of Socialist Art as “Graveyard of Fallen Monuments” or “Socialist Sculpture Graveyard”. Talking about the Museum of Socialist Art, Russian journalists state that those type of sculpture park-museums are the “perfect graveyard for the fallen heroes” and that the importance of their existence could be found in the fact that “one can run away from exile but not from a museum”. In this sense, the museum is seen as a form of punishment and revenge towards the past. And while this symbolic “burial” of the former ideological leaders was not part of the conception of the creators of the sculpture park-museums, the public sees them as such and this transforms their whole purpose.

Admittedly, the metaphor of cemetery is inspired not only by the symbolism of the death of a statue, but also by the way the majority of the sculpture park-museums is organized. What is common for the museums in Hungary, Russia, Lithuania and Bulgaria is that the sculptures are arranged in alleys that allow the visitor to circulate along them and, eventually, to be told a story. The homogenous materials used – stone, granite or bronze – as well as the realistic style or dramatic imagery provoke an immediate association with a cemetery. Also, the fact that those sculptures are usually left to themselves, with no mediation or other information, as of their role, their authors or their symbolic importance in the past, makes the visit in the park often silent and resembling a pilgrimage.

Even though Paul Williams does not adopt the quasi-term that “sculptural graveyards” has become, he uses the metaphor of death quite freely, by

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entitling his article “The Afterlife of Communist Statuary”. He argues that this is meant in the sense that sculptures get a “second life” in the new museums, but it seems that this life after social death is different for all the sculptures, depending on the museum to which they were relocated.

Sculpture Park-Museums, a Possible Road to a Consensus?

We would like to propose a classification of this new type of museums, which are on the border between memorial museums and art museums, between historical museums and amusement parks. We insist on the fact that neither the Hungarian, nor the Russian, Lithuanian or Bulgarian cases have a somber and graveyard-esque concept and approach to the past. While visually the organization of a multitude of statues in straight alleys recalls specifically a cemetery, these museums today, more than 27 years after the fall of the Communist regime, have a new role. In his article Paul Williams asks the question of whether or not those parks are a temporary solution or they can continue to exist even after the memory of Socialism fades away? It is a valid question bearing in mind that their revolutionary character, their impulsive creation in some cases and their subsequent concentration on memory struggles cannot go on forever. The range of visitors is becoming larger; those are no longer limited to the carriers of the traumatic or nostalgic memory. The Socialist past is becoming more and more of interest, the younger generations and a lot of foreign tourists visit the museums that preserve the heritage of the past, free of emotions and judgment. And while museums evolve according to their visitors, they also develop according to the new research in the fields of History or Art History, according to the new museological concepts, that have known a serious development in the last two decades.

Grūtas Park

To propose a classification of the sculpture park-museums, it should be noted that out of all four, only one is private (even though supervised by the State), and this is the Lithuanian Grūtas Park. This special status makes it difficult to position, because while the other museums could be held accountable for

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the state policy towards the heritage of the past, in Lithuania the park is managed by a private individual. This does not mean, however, that the park is not representative for Lithuania’s attitude towards its monumental heritage. Paul Williams traces back the history of the Grūtas Park, from the competition for its creation in 1998 to its almost privatization by Vilius Malinauskas. He goes as far as to call it a “theme park” because of its immersive scenography and overly ironic approach. Grūtas Park is also the only one that is located in a place far away from the capital and this makes its public quite different than that of the museums in Russia, Hungary or Bulgaria. In “Stalin’s World”, as it is playfully renamed, the visitor could have a stroll in the forest and take notice of the sculptures that come out from behind trees, as well as experience different aspects of everyday life during Socialism.

**Memento Park**

Its private management aside, Grūtas Park could be compared to the first sculpture park-museum in Southeastern Europe, the Park of Statues in Budapest, inaugurated in 1993. Its conception was to house 41 emblematic ideological monuments and to organize them around three thematic axes: the infinite alley of the monuments that glorify the liberation; the infinite alley of the personalities of the workers’ movement; the infinite alley of the ideas of the workers’ movement. At the beginning, it was a museum that had a distinctly negative message that was centered mainly on the repressive character of the regime; it had a cold, graveyard-like feel to it. In 2005 the Hungarian government took the decision to renovate the museum for the celebration of the anniversary of the 1956 uprising. This is how the Park of Statues became the Memento Park in 2006. From that moment on it had an exhibition hall, a Witness square, as well as an artistic center, a tourist center and an educational center. It would seem that the museum has gained a lot from this revision of the past, since it now presented a lighter atmosphere. The new approach is, however, strongly ironic (with the Red Star Store, the Telephone booth with speeches by Lenin, Stalin, Mao-Tse-Tung, the cinema hall with the movie “The Life of an Agent” and the Trabant car) and could be related to that of the Grūtas Park. Then again, Memento Park’s website insists on the fact that it is “not

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16 Ibid., 187-189.
17 Ibid., 188.
19 Ibid., 92.
about Communism, but about the fall of Communism!"  

It should be pointed out that Memento Park is not a history museum, nor is it an art museum. Its concept was to talk about the recent past with irony, but without malice, all the while concentrating on two moments of Hungarian history – the 1956 uprising and the fall of Socialism in the country – which is an interesting way to evade the most conflictual memory points. Zsolt Horvath quotes the architect Akos Eleöd, the creator of the Park of Sculptures in Budapest, who says that the museum is based on both self-irony and self-control, a museum that should not take revenge on monuments since they were never put into question by the public: “everybody lived silently among these ‘propaganda objects’”, a museum that does not insist on moral or ethical deficiencies of the regime. And yet, after its renovation in 2005, the Memento Park has become an extreme case of the “Disneyfication” of museums. If it is now a museum of the “fall of Communism”, it is because its concept has changed, it relies more on the spectacular, the game, the absurdities of the past and all of those led to the fall of the regime. Marianne Hirsch proposes the term of postmemory to illustrate the connection to the objects “not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation”. This look upon the question of memory is essential to the studies of post Socialism since it treats the memory and the formation of the attitude of the younger generation regarding the past they never lived in, but is still felt in the present.

Paul Williams sees the Hungarian museum as a form of “derisive nostalgia”, a mature way to deal with the past, not through denying it or judging it, but by laughing at it. It is true that Memento Park, Grūtas Park, as well as other museums of Socialism in general have adopted this approach, as it allows
a better “diverting” experience, but also does not echo the museums of the past, that had a predominantly didactic discourse. The metaphor of “death” is, however, still present, and this is where Williams proposes an alternative terms to that of “graveyard” – “banishment”: “While the banished person was made non-present, their absence was also intended to be visibly apparent as a cautionary lesson to others.”

The theory of a derisive approach to the heritage, an approach that completely integrates the idea of its symbolic death, is adequate for the appearance of those museums that are created at the beginning of the political change. With the case of Memento Park we saw the difference that time can make in the conception and the development of a museum that has such a sensitive and conflict topic.

But not only a person can be banished – this is also a term used to fight the non-tangible fear, a spirit or a ghost. And in the context of fighting for the establishment of a new system, while exiling the public statues in parks in the outskirts of the capital is a first step, a second one is the inauguration of a memorial museum that can concentrate on the haunting memory of the recent past. In the Hungarian case, in 2002 another museum dedicated in part to the period of Socialism opened its doors, this time in the center of Budapest: The House of Terror Museum. As such, the Memento Park was no longer the only carrier of the memory of Socialism, with the multitude of museums the different discourses (nostalgic and traumatic) could find their place in a search for balance and consensus.

Park of Arts
Back at the beginning of the 1990s, some of the removed Soviet-era monuments found themselves in the park behind the Central House of Artists in Moscow. The mayor of the capital at the time, Yurii Luzhkov, said that this was “an excellent thought. It called into being a longtime dream: to gather together all of the bronze and granite Soviet leaders, heroes, farmers, to enclose them in a fence, and allow children to play there.” In 1996 the statues were restored, put in a specific order and the park was named the Park of Arts. The park is now a place for all kinds of statues, from the Soviet era, but also religious ones, as well as busts of famous artists, writers, composers, and illustrious people.

27 Ibid., 194.
While the Park of Arts is in a central location in Moscow, it continues to be commonly named Graveyard of Fallen Monuments. As Dominique Poulot writes in “Museum and museology”: “The museum has to conserve the elements of the past and to give them consciousness, to construct a narrative, without reducing the visitors to silent observers but also without giving up to the too empathic representation and to engage affective responses.”

The Park of Arts has no story to tell, it does not have a specific discourse, and this renders it almost obsolete. James Young quotes Robert Musil: “Nothing in the world is more invisible than a monument.” In James Young’s logic, this is quite true, especially if we believe that monuments (and we add to this – museums of monuments) are created in order to forget or to liberate from the events they depict. Today, the Park of Arts is not well known as a museum dedicated to the public art of the Socialist period, it is often omitted in works dedicated to the problem of the monumental heritage of the past and it seems it has not managed to respond to the expectations of Russians.

Forest and Johnson dedicate a very important article to Moscow’s park-museum and emphasize one extremely important detail, revealing its somewhat conservative approach. At the end of the 1990s, panels had been installed on the most important Soviet-era statues in the Park of Arts, identifying the subject, artist, material used, and location where the piece had been displayed. After this description, the panels ended with a depoliticizing disclaimer: “It has historical and artistic value. The monument is in the memorializing style of political-ideological designs of the Soviet period. Protected by the state.” Since the panel states irrevocably that the monument is of historical and artistic value, we could return to Alain Resnais’ and Chris Marker’s quote from the beginning and say that this is a case of an attempt of a consensus on the importance of Socialist heritage and inscribe it in a long and continuous tradition. It is a step that was of extreme importance to the acceptance of the art of the Socialist period, especially that of Socialist Realism. An example of this is the new permanent exhibition at the Manege in Moscow, dedicated to Vera Mukhina’s emblematic sculpture “The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman” that has a purpose to follow the development of this ideological image through the years and its artistic appropriations until today. It is a collection that has pretended neutrality in the vision, with a balance between this omnipresent

31 Ibid., 735.
32 Forest and Johnson, “Unraveling the Threads of History,” 537.
symbol of Socialism in the East and the irony towards it. This not only is, we find, an excellent attempt of making peace with the past, but also a way to put aesthetics before politics, aesthetic memory as an appeasement of the conflict of memories.

Bulgaria has waited for more than 20 years in order to create its first museum dedicated to the Socialist period. In the 1990s sculptures were removed from the public space and discarded without care. The Museum of Socialist Art is a representative for those “sculptural graveyards” that appear in post-Socialist countries. The main question is: are the monuments of historical and artistic value? With the creation of the Museum of Socialist Art, the state tried to finally give an answer.

The Museum of Socialist Art: an art museum?
The debate surrounding the creation of a museum of Socialism in Bulgaria had been going since the beginning of the political changes. While the other countries from the former Eastern Bloc were creating different types of museums dedicated to the recent past, in Bulgaria there was a lot of indecision on this subject. The conflict of nostalgic and traumatic memory made a consensual decision extremely difficult and this is why art, somehow naturally, stepped up. The first exhibitions dedicated to the period were exclusively art exhibitions. Sofia Municipal Art Gallery presented two of them: “The Poster in Bulgaria 1946 – 1955” (March - April 1999) and “Socialist Realism from the Collection of the Sofia Municipal Art Gallery” (15 January – 15 February 2002). In 2009, the National Art Gallery proposed the exhibition “Underground Stores”. The common denominator in all of these exhibitions was the art period and the artistic method exhibited – that of Socialist Realism. As a part of the traumatic discourse, an image of the art of Socialism was being conveyed, an image of a permanently imposed and non-evolving normative aesthetics during the whole duration of the period.

The discussions on the musealization of Socialism continued, but a museum that responded plainly to the expectations of the carriers of traumatic memory is still not a fact. A museum of the nostalgia towards Socialism, called Retro Museum, a private initiative, however has opened its doors in Varna in 2015. And in 2011 in Sofia opened a museum in search for a consensus of memories, memories that have not really had the possibilities to be expressed.

33 See Kazalarska, Museum of Communism, [In Bulgarian].
34 For more information about the exhibition, see: Gabriela Petkova-Campbell, Five Essays on Bulgarian Museums and Communism (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015).
On the 19th of September 2011, the Museum of Socialist Art was inaugurated. The Minister of Culture Vezhdi Rashidov – a well-known Bulgarian sculptor – announced it as a representative part of the best works of art created during the years 1944-1989 and Simeon Dyankov, the Minister of Finances, declared that “socialism has finally gone where it belonged – into a museum”.

The long awaited museum of Socialism was finally inaugurated in Sofia. It was, however, not what most people expected, since it was an art museum, a branch of the National Art Gallery. Maybe because of the arts affiliation of the Minister of Culture, and maybe as an attempt of a consensus and a less controversial approach, the Museum of Socialist Art is the only one in former Socialist countries that is solely dedicated to the art production of the period, at the same time mass production, big state commands and selection of the best sculptural works of the time.

The Museum consists of a single exhibition space, a sculptural park and a video room where fragments of news reportages could be seen, showing everyday life during the different decades of Socialism, manifestations on public holidays, as well as emblematic moments of the post-period, like the destruction of the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in 1999.

The inaugural exhibition, that was initially supposed to be a permanent one, represented works of art from different periods and of the most prominent Bulgarian artists from the second half of the 20th century. This approach was not accepted by the general public that found it was degrading for artists to be exhibited in what was more or less seen as a “collaboration” museum, or a museum that would exhibit the art of collaborating with the regime artists. That is why relatively quickly this first exhibition, that carried no title, was replaced by the second one, entitled “The Totalitarian Art”. It represented the art from the first decade after the coup d’état from 1944 in Bulgaria and was, just like the previously organized exhibitions in Bulgaria, particularly interested in Socialist Realism. The political poster was, of course, the logical thematic continuation of the exhibitions of propaganda art.

Followed some others (Recorded Memories (March-May 2013), 25 Years of Infinite Transition (November 2014-April 2015)) concentrated more on the contemporary period and the question of memory but they were not really part of the wholesome conception of the museum as much as singular initiative.

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of different curators. It was in March 2016 that a more general exhibition plan was announced by the new curator of the Museum of Socialist Art, Nikolay Ushtavaliysky. With the “Image of the Leader”\textsuperscript{37} he manifested his desire to start a series of exhibitions that would reveal different types of official canon and trends in the art during Socialism. This is one of the crucial moments in the existence of this young museum, as it would allow for it to create a more constant image and to finally define its role in the debate in the search for a consensus.

The name of the museum was another object of controversy: “Socialist art”. This is a term that was used as a way out of “Socialist Realism” since the 1960s and that could more or less pretend to be everything. Prof. Chavdar Popov defined it in his article simply as “an art created during the Socialist period.”\textsuperscript{38} This is one of the main reasons the name was so harshly criticized by the public and by art historians, since it was leaving the field too large, not to mention that the term has not been officially adopted by Art History. We could even allow ourselves to add to this discussion by making a comparison between the uses of the term “Socialist art” today in the post-socialist times, while during Socialism Western art was often designated as “Capitalist art”. Terminologically speaking, the term “Socialist art” is important here in its significance for the search for a consensus. The name of the museum was changed numerous times before its inauguration and the strongest emotions were exhibited towards changing it to the term “Totalitarian art”, as it would convey at least a part of the repressions that were characteristic for the regime. But the term was judged as not corresponding to the idea of representativeness of the art creation of the Socialist period. A compromise was made with the second exhibition, that of Socialist Realism and many of those that followed.

In the sculptural park, which is the \textit{de facto} permanent exhibition of the Museum of Socialist Art, the most emblematic monuments from the public space of different Bulgarian towns are presented, alongside with, bizarrely, indoor sculptures from the collections of the National Art Gallery as well as the former Museum of the Revolutionary Movement and Home of the Active Combatants Against Fascism and Capitalism. The more or less chaotic order of the sculptures that does not obey any possible logic – thematic, chronologic or even size-wise – is a basis for important critiques. The Minister of Culture

\textsuperscript{37} See (Exhibition catalogue) \textit{The Image of the Leader (March-November 2016)} (Sofia: National Gallery, Museum of Socialist Art, 2016), 7. [In Bulgarian].

has personally chosen the sculptures for the park and he has supervised their placement. Many saw this as an attempt for a personal vendetta against his colleagues, some of them his rivals in the art field.

The sculptural park is also the main object of interest of the Museum of Socialist Art. It may be incomplete when it comes to information about the former placement of the monuments or the context of their creation, but the mixture of official ideological cult figures and contemporary works has an effect of surprise and thus of breaking the misconceptions of the art of the period. The Bulgarian sculpture park-museum is the only one that actually proposes sculptures this diverse in style, thematic and purpose. Among the cult figures of Lenin and Dimitrov could be found representations of the Republic (as the one by Lyubomir Dalchev from 1974), of the Rachenitsa, a Bulgarian folk dance (by Velichko Minekov, 1972) or a Requiem (by Nedko Krastev and Nikolina Kanarova, 1984). This is what makes this museum unique and it explains why its approach towards the past is this different than its counterparts in Hungary and Lithuania. The Museum of Socialist Art does not convey even an ounce of irony. It presents the artistic heritage of Socialism in a traditional and conservative way, which actually reinforces its impact. However, the representation of the sculptures is such, that the association valid for other park-museums is coming full-force: that of a “sculptural graveyard”.

The neat alleys and the freshly cut grass, as well as the concrete standardized pedestals, strive to make a neutral environment from the park. And while the surrounding eclectic architecture, from old storage buildings to modern office towers, shows movement, development, life, the park seems timeless. The cemetery metaphor is fully realized, if not by anything else, then by the fact that in the first weeks after the inauguration of the museum many people came to leave flowers at the feet of some statues, in a sort of commemoration ceremonial, that repeats itself each year on the 1st of May and on the 9th of September.39

As a fully assumed art museum, a branch of the National Art Gallery, the Museum of Socialist Art attempted to reach above the numerous ongoing debates and discussions and to propose an emotion-free view of the recent past. However, the creation of this park-museum was not seen as a symbolic death of the sculptures, but more as a resurrection. This is why, barely a year after its inauguration, an association of Bulgarian writers and the heirs of the poet Nikola Vaptsarov40 demanded that a statue of him be removed from the

39 The date of the coup d’état from 1944 and a national holiday until 1989.
40 Nikola Vaptsarov (1909-1942) was one of Bulgaria’s most modern and well-known poets. He became a symbolic figure for the Communist regime because of his work as a revolutionary
museum and returned to its original place, in the park behind the National Art Gallery, from where it was taken down at the beginning of the 1990s. The presence of this statue in a museum dedicated to Socialism was seen as a stigmatization and tarnishing of his memory, reducing it to his political activity. With no debate and little to no arguments for the preservation, from the side of the National Art Gallery, the statue was removed and reinstalled at the center of the capital. The *Poet-worker* by Nikolay Shmirgela⁴¹ became the only sculpture to leave with a scandal the Museum of Socialist Art, because of the uneven stance on memory that the museum has taken.⁴²

**Conclusion**

The pedestal of the *Poet-worker* is still empty in the sculptural park of the museum. And somehow this is a louder statement for the conflict of memories than any other. The fact that statues could be removed from the museums that are supposed to preserve them is revealing as for the raging conflict of memories, but also for the living, active and engaging aspect of the sculpture park-museums. Sofia is not the only place where an empty pedestal has remained as a witness to conflicts and indecision about the rightful approach to undertake towards the past. In Bucharest, Lenin’s pedestal had remained empty for more than 20 years at the center of the capital, until a contemporary art project inhabited it temporarily and thus sped along the creation of a new monument on its place.⁴³ In Kiev, once again it is Lenin’s pedestal that is left empty and is now animated by artistic projects.⁴⁴ For the moment, sculpture park-museums have remained fixated on their double approaches – ironic or conservative. We now notice a new vague of investment in the field of preservation and readaptation of Socialist monuments in the contemporary art field. This is one of the focal points of the contemporary debate and slowly it could find its way to haunt the “sculptural graveyards”.

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⁴¹ Nikolay Shmirgela (1911-1999) was one of the most prominent Bulgarian sculptors.
⁴² Ironically, in the museum there is a head of the same poet, at the end of a central alley, but there has never been a question of its removal.
Bibliography:


Sources:


