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“Weak Monumentality”: Contemporary Art, Reparative Action, and Postsocialist Conditions

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“Revised Commemoration” in Public Art: What Future for the Monument?
État des lieux de la « commémoration corrigée » en art public : quel avenir pour le monument ?

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Résumé de l'article

Après la dissolution du bloc socialiste, de nombreuses oeuvres d’art public commémoratives créées sous les régimes communistes ont été démantelées, alors que d’autres sont tombées en ruines. Souvent, les monuments produits dans l’ancienne Union soviétique sont vus comme un héritage comparable au colonialisme. En Europe du Sud-Est, la monumentalité de l’ère socialiste est souvent plus directement liée à des héritages antifascistes localisés, étant donné le grand nombre d’oeuvres commémoratives dédiées aux mouvements de résistance partisans. Cet article se penche sur les pratiques de Luiza Margan, Nada Prlja et Armando Lulaj, qui recourent à la vidéo, à la performance et à la photographie pour explorer la culture commémorative socialiste. Puisant dans de récentes discussions sur la « théorie faible », l’article développe un cadre théorique de la « monumentalité faible » pour décrire les pratiques artistiques récupératrices et restauratrices qui nouent un dialogue avec le patrimoine monumental socialiste.

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"Weak Monumentality": Contemporary Art, Reparative Action, and Postsocialist Conditions

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Après la dissolution du bloc socialiste, de nombreuses œuvres d'art public commémoratives créées sous les régimes communistes ont été démantelées, alors que d'autres sont tombées en ruines. Souvent, les monuments produits dans l'ancienne Union soviétique sont vus comme un héritage comparable au colonialisme. En Europe du Sud-Est, la monumentalité de l'ère socialiste est souvent plus directement liée à des héritages antifascistes localisés, étant donné le grand nombre d'œuvres commémoratives dédiées aux mouvements de résistance partisans. Cet article se penche sur les pratiques de Luiza Margan, Nada Prlja et Armando Lulaj, qui recourent à la vidéo, à la performance et à la photographie pour explorer la culture commémorative socialiste. Puisant dans de récentes discussions sur la «théorie faible», l'article développe un cadre théorique de la «monumentalité faible» pour décrire les pratiques artistiques récupératrices et restauratrices qui nouent un dialogue avec le patrimoine monumental socialiste.

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I. Introduction

How might we begin to theorize those instances in which the monument—a privileged form of official ideological dissemination, authoritarian legibility, and dominance—emerges as something enfeebled? When do contemporary artists find it necessary to go beyond an opposition to the monument and instead adopt a reparative approach that acknowledges monumentality as a weakened form, amenable to affective transformations? This article examines a constellation of practices that might be termed "weak monumentality," occupying a hybrid territory at the intersection of weak theory, continued explorations and adaptations of the counter-monument, and the attention to the historical consciousness and material culture of formerly "peripheral" modernities. It considers the works of three artists from Southeastern Europe: Luiza Margan, Nada Prlja, and Armando Lulaj. Their works approach monuments and monumentality in differing ways, but share an interest in recuperation that moves beyond simply critiquing the ideological complicity of monumental commemorative projects. Through strategies both material and conceptual, these artists suggest that we encounter monumentality—in their specific cases, socialist monumentality—as something already weakened. In their works, we are faced with the task of both resisting monumentality's appeal and recovering its emotional claim on a potentially collective form of historical consciousness.

The works of art I consider here—Luiza Margan's *Eye to Eye with Freedom* (2014), Nada Prlja's *Humanistic Communism* (2016), and Armando Lulaj's *NEVER* (2012)—are embedded firmly in global processes of decolonization and revised understandings of Cold War transnationalism: they acknowledge the association of monumentality with colonial and authoritarian projects, while also retrieving a collective approach to monumental praxis from the (relatively) recent socialist past. In grouping these works under the speculative moniker "weak monumentality," I do not intend to suggest any pejorative evaluation of their approach to monumentality (as might be understood from the appellation "weak"). Rather, I align these with a trend that has gradually gained ground in recent decades in disciplines such as philosophy and literary theory: "weak thought" or "weak theory," associated with the writings of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo and literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (who builds upon psychologist Silvan Tomkins'

"weak affect theory").[1] Weak theory seeks to put aside the ontological hierarchies, epistemological certainties, and paranoia regarding ideological deception that frequently characterized theory and criticism in the postwar period, instead privileging responsiveness and a certain credulity towards those objects of aesthetic criticism that continue to exercise a marked emotional appeal upon us. I might preliminarily define "weak monumentality," then, as an artistic practice that engages the monument not as a categorical sign of authority, but instead as a productive site of ontological uncertainty amenable to reparative efforts and interpretations. Weak monumentality does not aim to undo the monument; it seeks to use it as a focal point to both recover and discover new affective patterns, and new ways of being together, while still acknowledging its problematic perceived authority.

In aligning the artists I discuss here with a framework inspired by the philosophical language of weak theory, I take their works to be part of a global shift in contemporary culture that extends in significance far beyond Southeastern Europe, where they primarily work. However, weak thought and theory are themselves efforts to enhance responsiveness to specific circumstances and marginal experiences. As will become clear below, in the discussion of Vattimo and Sedgwick, weak thought situates itself in particular emotional situations, and as such I think it appropriate to focus upon the specificities of a particular historical situation—if only so that later we might extrapolate broader avenues for art historical investigation. As such, I focus here on artists working in the same region, in countries whose postwar circumstances are at once similar and quite different.

The former Yugoslavia and Albania represent, in an important way, the two opposite ends of a spectrum of the possibilities of postwar nonaligned socialism, and as such they escape the binary framework that guided studies of Cold War culture and postsocialism for many years. In terms of monuments and commemoration, however, they share an important characteristic: socialist monumentality in Yugoslavia and Albania possesses a different contemporary ideological valence because of the legacies of the Partisan antifascist struggle and Cold War-era nonalignment in both countries (even in the cases of monuments that are not explicitly dedicated to the Partisans). Albania, while staunchly Stalinist because of its dictator Enver Hoxha, was not part of the Soviet Union, and after Stalin's death it pursued a unique (and by the mid-1970s an increasingly isolationist) form of nonalignment vis-à-vis both the capitalist West and the Soviet sphere of influence.[2] Yugoslavia's role in founding the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 grew out of its early break with Stalin in 1948, and allowed it to develop a quite distinct form of socialist modernist culture.[3] Despite their different forms of nonalignment, however, Albania and Yugoslavia shared a history of localized antifascist resistance that had given rise to their postwar socialist regimes: the Partisan movement. The Partisan resistance is the name given to a diverse range of military resistance movements across Europe that fought against various fascist occupying forces in the Second World War,[4] but in many ways the movement's localized manifestations in Southeastern

1. For an overview of different approaches to weak theory, see Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory/Weak Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 25, no. 3 (September 2018): 437–459.

2. Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

3. Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985* (Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

4. A concise overview of Partisan military efforts in the greater context of European resistance against fascism is given in Jørgen Hæstrup, *European Resistance Movements, 1939–1945: A Complete History* (Westport: Meckler, 1981), 460–493.

Europe were exemplary in their decentralized, grassroots character, and left-wing governments across Europe and Asia had significant investments in the outcomes of the resistance there.[5] The Partisan movements in Yugoslavia and Albania were key to establishing the leftist legitimacy of postwar governments,[6] since Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha and Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito were both Partisan leaders in their respective national movements.[7]

In the postwar period, the Partisan antifascist movement represented at once a viable legacy of social revolution brought about by localized leftist forces and a challenge to the Soviet Union's broader imperialist agenda, which sought to claim the victory over fascism as the purview of the Soviet Red Army. In Albania and Yugoslavia, the Partisan resistance became a key element in postwar commemorative art.[8] Thus, unlike many other postsocialist contexts—in which socialist monumentality has largely become a kind of colonialist legacy of Soviet power (represented by monuments to the Red Army and to Soviet leaders like Lenin and Stalin)[9]—in former Yugoslavia and Albania the commemorative heritage of the socialist period more readily suggests other possible recuperations, ones that can confront the authoritarian past while still seeking the groundwork for radical returns to that past.

In what follows, I first examine the intertwinements of embodiment, ideology, and affect present in two of the works I propose to consider under the rubric of weak monumentality: Luiza Margan's *Eye to Eye with Freedom* and Nada Prlja's *Humanistic Communism*. Juxtaposing these two works allows us to understand the ways that confrontations with the monument—and monumentality—are not always of the deconstructive, avant-garde variety we often associate with the counter-monument. I proceed to suggest why the framework of counter-monumentality (so widespread in discussions of post-totalitarian, postcolonial, and postsocialist contemporary art)[10] may not fully capture what is at stake in the works that are the focus of this investigation, and I trace the philosophical trajectory of weak thought, seeking to highlight some of the ways that such theoretical projects are resonant with the critical projects of artists working in response to socialist commemorative heritage. Then, I consider a further example, Armando Lulaj's *NEVER*, a work that makes anew without completely unmaking the monument, without deconstructing its premises or radically altering its appeal. Finally, I suggest how we might consider weak monumentality as a framework that extends beyond the specific geographical and historical context of Southeastern Europe, suggesting that "weakness" allows us to envision a role for monumental heritage that can still help us navigate the inequities of a postsocialist, postcolonial, and capitalist present.

II. Rising Up, Crouching Down

In Luiza Margan's 2014 public intervention *Eye to Eye with Freedom*, the artist arranged for a crane to be installed in the open square in front of Vinko Matković's *Monument to Liberation* (1955) in Rijeka, Croatia, allowing visitors to be elevated in small groups so that they could gaze into the eyes of the

5. Tony Judt, "Introduction," in Resistance and Revolution in *Mediterranean Europe*, ed. Tony Judt (New York: Routledge, 1989), 12–13.

6. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 41.

7. Stanislav Sretenovic and Artan Puto, "Leader Cults in the Western Balkans (1945–90): Josip Broz Tito and Enver Hoxha," in *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, ed. Balázs Apor, et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 208–223.

8. On the case of Yugoslavia, see Gal Kirn, "Towards the Partisan Counter-Archive: Poetry, Sculpture, and Film on/of the People's Liberation Struggle," *Slavica Tergestina* 17 (2016): 100–125.

9. See Reuben Fowkes, "You Only Live Twice: The Strange Afterlife of Socialist Sculpture," in *Bucharest: Matter & History: The Public Monument and Its Discontents*, ed. Anca Benera (Bucharest: 2010), 213–233.

10. See, for example, Fowkes, "You Only Live Twice"; Corina Apostol, "Anti-Monuments: Afterlives of Monumentality and Specters of Memory," in *Close-Up: Post-Transition Writings* (Prague: The Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), 122–133; and Caterina Preda, "'Project 1990' as an Anti-Monument in Bucharest and the Aestheticisation of Memory," *Südosteuropa* 64, no. 3 (2016): 307–324.

Figures 1–2. Luiza Margan, *Eye to Eye with Freedom*, 2014. Public intervention, Rijeka, Croatia. Courtesy of the artist.

female Partisan in Matković's figural group. | **figs. 1–2** | Flanked by two male soldiers, the Partisan woman at the center of the sculpture—her left fist extended ecstatically forward while her right arm reaches back, palm open to summon her followers—is at once a powerful and a stiffly formulaic example of Socialist Realist allegorical figuration. Mounted atop a sheer vertical T-shaped plinth (the "T" indexing Tito), Matković's grouping embodies one of the paradoxes of socialist art: that it so frequently seems to occur on a higher plane of existence, beyond the realm of everyday life, even as it claims to reflect the lived experience of revolutionary struggle. Its bronze surface stained and streaked by exposure to the elements, Matković's Partisan figures might have seemed lost in the clouds, as it were, condemned to an oblivion above the level of citizens' lives, "remnants of a fallen, unattainable utopian vision" (as another author has described socialist monuments in postsocialist Bulgaria).[11]

Margan's thoughtful intervention grew out of her engagement with images from sculptor Vinko Marković's own archive, documenting the creation of the monument—from a skeletal inner structure to the full-scale maquette—as well as from her interest in investigating the relationship between gender and political power in public space.[12] *Eye to Eye with Freedom* is paradigmatic of the artistic concerns that this article seeks to understand: in raising viewers up to the level of the figural group, and particularly to the allegorical figure of victory, Margan staged at once a challenge and a moment of physical intimacy. The ability to meet the Partisan's gaze produced a moment of reckoning—the implied ideological distance between the socialist past (of the former Yugoslavia) and the postsocialist present (of Croatia) was closed, and certainly the failed dreams of postwar revolutionary fervor must have been readily apparent in the visibly aging surfaces of the bronzes. But at the same time, Margan's interactive work also allowed its visitors the opportunity to ponder the Partisan group, and its protagonist in particular, from up close, to really be *in the presence* of the figures at a much more human scale. Finally, the artist's act of lifting visitors up underscored the very paradox of elevation, marking the elevated body as superior at the same time that it produces (in many, at least) a sensation of vertigo, an awareness of bodily vulnerability. However, the entire intervention was also more broadly intertwined with the protection of bodies, since the Rijeka fire department volunteered to provide and operate the crane that lifted visitors up to view the monument. Margan has noted the significance of the firefighters' participation, since their experience with "taking care" of people produced a sincere and personal element to the action.[13]

Now let us consider a kind of precise formal inverse of Margan's intervention, though one whose conceptual impetus is very similar. On May 5, 2016, the North Macedonian artist Nada Prlja organized a workshop entitled *Humanistic Communism* in the Albanian capital city of Tirana. The press release for the workshop, which formed part of the artist's broader project *Subversion to Red*, stated that a "group of participant[s]" would "show love and care toward the old socialist monuments, by hugging, caressing, kissing,

11. Zhivka Valiavicharska, "History's Restless Ruins: On Socialist Public Monuments in Postsocialist Bulgaria," *boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 174.

12. See the artist's lecture on the work as part of the conference associated with the project Heroes We Love, at the Maribor Art Gallery, March 21, 2015, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-oVBnvEU19s.

13. Ibid.

[and] cleaning [them,] and by daydreaming together of a system" that might provide an alternative to "the cruelty of current or new systems to come."[14] The workshop took place behind the National Gallery of the Arts, where—in a gravel parking lot—a collection of monumental statues and busts have gradually accumulated since the end of the socialist period in Albania in 1991. The sculptures included two statues of Stalin, one of Lenin, one of the Partisan heroine Liri Gero, and one of a typified socialist worker. Placed partially out of view behind the museum, the statues occupied a curiously liminal space, somewhere between the oblivion of the scrap heap and the calm oasis of the sculpture park. During the course of the hybrid workshop and performance, participants embraced the statues and huddled next to them, taking shelter beneath their oversized coats. They mimicked their gestures and reached out to intervene in their frozen movements. They saluted them, confronted them, and knelt before them.

One image taken during the workshop rewards prolonged attention. | **fig. 3** | It shows a trio of sculptures and two human figures. At left in the photograph stands sculptor Hektor Dule's *In One Hand the Rifle, in the Other the Pickaxe* (1970s), a work whose title derives from one of the most popular slogans used by the Albanian Party of Labor. The worker's rigid gesture and stern expression sharply delineate the space of the interactions taking place in the rest of the image. At right, a much larger bronze figure is only partially captured by the framing, from the waist down; we see the long vertical descent of his trenchcoat. This is Odhise Paskali's statue of Joseph Stalin, which once stood at the entrance of the Stalin Textile Factory on the western edge of Tirana, the ideologue's extended arm summoning the workers into the factory below. We see this welcoming gesture echoed in the photo by the young woman standing before the statue (wearing a long coat of her own), her eyes closed and face raised, her right arm uplifted. Between these two bronzes sits a bust, covered in a white tarpaulin held in place by a few cords cinched around the head and shoulders. The bust is that of the Albanian socialist dictator Enver Hoxha, his nose smashed away by vandals (but of course we cannot know this from the photograph alone). Crouched in front of this shrouded object is a hunched human figure, with lower legs, feet, and elbows visible beneath the cover of a plaid shirt that wraps the figure's head and upper body. The figure squats, one foot on the edge of the white tarp, one foot off.

The two workshop participants who appear in the image present a curious continuum of bodily interactions with the monument. At one extreme of this continuum, we have the effort to mirror the monument's pose, and with it the affective charge of the monument as a distillation of ideals. The monument's gesture clearly codifies it as a sign in space—a marker indicating direction of movement and acceptance (or rejection). At the same time, its signifying aspect mobilizes the body as a material form, calling most directly for an embodied, emotional response that situates spectators in relation to the monument. The fact that Stalin's gesture, and even his identity, are absent from the photograph, that they only appear mirrored through

14. "Double Feature #4: Nikolin Bujari and Nada Prlja" (press release), Tirana Art Lab, http://www.tiranaartlab.org/double-feature/double-feature-4-nikolin-bujari-nada-prlja. The project was originally titled *Humanistic Communism*, but Prlja has subsequently begun to refer to it as Humane Communism. I have retained the initial title in this essay, because I think the that legacies of philosophical humanism are a vital element in the questions the work raises.

Figures 3–4. Nada Prlja, *Humanistic Communism* (part of *Subversion to Red*), 2016. Workshop organized by TAL (Tirana Art Lab). Workshop participants: Aurora Kalemi, Mirjana Meçaj, Lucas Vogt, Ruzmira Beqiraj Bejaj. Held at the National Gallery of Arts, Tirana, Albania. Photograph by Nada Prlja and TAL. Courtesy of TAL and the artist.

the actions of the woman, draws attention to the power of this relationship. Of course, this is a peculiarity unique to this particular photograph; other documentation of the performance allows for the easy comparison of the monument to its imitator. | **fig. 4** | But what is visible at the scale of the human is only sometimes visible at the scale of the monument, and vice versa. At the other extreme of this continuum is the crouched, covered figure. Here we see the human figure struggling to imitate the monument as something unknown, concealed—the human figure seeking, by means of the monument, a certain formlessness that comes with mundane oblivion.

III. Monumental Weakness

It must be said at the outset that weak monumentality, the aesthetic position I hope to elaborate here, barely exists as a coherently theorized position within the network of overlapping approaches to postwar artistic and architectural practice. A survey of artist statements and curatorial texts will turn up virtually no mentions of the concept. However, I want to argue that the idea of weak monumentality nonetheless possesses significant potential as a paradigm for imagining the relationship between sculptural and architectural criticism, debates on monuments as contested cultural heritage, and weakened theoretical positions. In short, this is an essay about what weak monumentality is, but even moreso about what it *could be*. I aim to draw out how weak monumentality might be construed as its own distinct set of aesthetic and political strategies, moving beyond counter-monumentality and enriching the nexus of approaches associated with "weakness" as a project.

Monuments and monumentality have generated a great deal of controversy over the course of the last three decades. Postwar monumentality has been dialectically intertwined with the dissolution of the "logic of the monument" into the "expanded field,"[15] on the one hand, and the inversions and ephemeral gestures of counter-monumentality,[16] on the other. In other words, the traditional monument has had to vie with the aesthetic challenges posed first by Minimalism and Land Art and later by performance,[17] as well as with the political and ideological challenges posed by monumentality's enduring association with authoritarianism and colonialism. To describe the plethora of artistic practices that have sprung up aiming to move beyond the traditional notion of the monument, curators and scholars have deployed notions such as the anti-monument,[18] the nonument,[19] the post-monument,[20] and the open monument.[21] Simultaneously, the very idea of the monument has become increasingly associated with weakness, rather than strength; as Zygmunt Bauman has asserted, "Monuments are nowadays…contingent, frail and perishable."[22]

This proliferation of counters, nons, and posts indicates the troubling position that monumentality occupies in our time. Theorist Suzana Milevska calls this conflicted existence of the monument in contemporary society "monumentomachia"—the continued overwriting of monuments and their contradictions with new monuments, new anti-monumental projects, and new voids within memory and public space.[23] The monument clearly

15. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" *October* 8 (Spring, 1979): 30–44.

16. The counter-monument is chiefly associated with James E. Young's analysis of the work of a number of German artists working in the 1980s, who responded to the legacy of fascist monumentality and the need for a commemorative form that would adequately confront the work of memory to be done surrounding the Holocaust. See Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (Winter, 1992): 267–296.

17. Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialization of Public Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 4–6.

18. Alex Adriaansens and Joke Brouwer, "Alien Relationships from Public Space: A Winding Dialog with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer," *TransUrbanism* (Rotterdam, 2002), 139–158.

19. The term "nonument" was first used in relation to the work of Gordon Matta-Clark; see Judith Russi Kirshner, "Non-Uments," *Artforum* 24, no. 2 (October, 1985), 102–108.

20. Fabio Cavallucci, ed., *Post-Monument: XIV Biennale Internazionale di Scultura di Carrara* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2010).

21. Marta Jecu, ed., *Open Monument: Research into Ephemeral, Commemorative Architecture and Modernist Patrimony* (Berlin: Kunstraum Kreutzberg, 2013).

22. Qtd. in Christina Natalicchio, "Economical Crisis and Postmonuments," in *Post-Monument*, ed. Cavallucci, 23.

represents something from which we wish to free ourselves, or against which we juxtapose our own ways of living and remembering together. Monuments appear as objects that are both aesthetically retrograde and politically dubious; they so often represent untruth, and our reactions against them indicate our own enduring attachment to truth. After all, there are still subjects widely recognized as in need of monumentalization, deserving of the focused commemorative dignity bestowed by traditional forms of the monument.[24] In the face of such histories, the focused deconstructive modes of counter-monuments or the postmodern appeal of some imagined post-monumentality seem dangerously cynical. Is there, then, any reparative attempt to recuperate the monument, not falling prey to its deceptive claims but also not dismissing its forms and the necessity of their appeal to emotion and memory alike? Below, I chart the theoretical references that might inspire such a reparative effort and consider further examples of artistic practices from Southeastern Europe that might open the monument up as a new grounds of commemorative practices. In attempts to re-engage monuments through care, curiosity, and re-inscription, artists posit ways that commemorative structures and objects—even those that have become strongly associated with an authoritarian past—can still generate new memories and new hopes, precisely when they are viewed as incomplete or amenable to transformation.

Weak monumentality is the name that I propose to give to this network of intensifications and enervations. The idea of the weak monument has been applied to disparate phenomena, including the cartography of public murders in the city of Thessaloniki;[25] the relationship between monumentality, regionalism, and indigeneity in Sámi architecture;[26] the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, Australia;[27] the development of contemporary art in response to socialist monumentality in Albania,[28] and the multiplicity of apparently extra-monumental structures found in Estonian public space.[29] These diverse examples are united by the desire to articulate contemporary practices of commemoration and historicization that neither uncritically embrace the longevity, visual clarity, and heroism associated with the traditional (architectural or sculptural) monument, nor wholeheartedly seek to undo the political and aesthetic premises of that monumentality—in other words, practices that are neither wholly capitulatory nor wholly oppositional. In most cases, however, they are focused more directly on architecture, as opposed to commemorative sculpture, which is my focus here. To understand these practices, we must chart some of the vicissitudes of the counter-monument and the anti-monument, but we must also trace the philosophical trajectory that gives rise to the term "weak monumentality" itself.

Weak monumentality takes its primary inspiration from philosopher Gianni Vattimo's pensiero debole, or "weak thought," which attempts to construct a model of groundless hermeneutic investigation appropriate to the postmodern era, in which transcendental and unchanging metaphysical narratives have lost their credibility. Vattimo's writings on weak

23. Suzana Milevska, "The Lack and Its 'Supplement': Visible Monuments, Intolerable Violence," *Open Studio* (2016), http://www.openstudio.sk/sites/default/files/suzana_milevska_0.pdf.

24. In the United States, the paradigmatic example might be the experience of slavery, a topic that continues to resist monumental representation, even as the weight and historical significance of the trauma of enslavement demands it. See Renée Ater, "Slavery and Its Public Monuments," *American Art* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 20–23, and Ater's ongoing research into contemporary monuments to the slave past, https://www.reneeater.com/on-monuments-blog/.

25. Weak Monuments was the title of a 2009 exhibition organized by architect Aristide Antonas and the Built Event group in Thessaloniki, seeking to link the urban context to the history of sites of murders in the city. See http://antonas.pbworks.com/w/page/13336891/weak%20monuments.

26. Elin Haugdal, "Strategies of Monumentality in Contemporary Sámi Architecture," in *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Svein Aamold, Elin Haugdal, and Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2017), 211–235.

27. Gregory Cowan, "Tent Embassies: Collapsing Australia and Architecture", in *Informal Architectures*, ed. Anthony Kiendl (London, 2008), 164–171; and Paul Walker, "Tents and Monuments," *Fabrications* 25, no. 3 (2015): 304–321. Cowan and Walker, like Haugdal, look to Gianni Vattimo in their theorizing of weakness, not to Eve Sedgwick.

28. Raino Isto, "Weak Monumentality and Post/Socialism: A Theoretical Proposition," *afterart*, July 6, 2016, https://afterart.org/2016/07/06/weak-monumentality-and-postsocialism-a-theoretical-proposition/.

29. See Tadeáš Říha, Laura Linsi, and Roland Reemaa, *Weak Monument: Architectures Beyond the Plinth* (Zürich: Park Books, 2018), the catalog accompanying the Estonian Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennial.

thought take their own inspiration from Martin Heidegger's investigations of the nature of truth in art. Weak thought, Vattimo writes, is the kind of thinking that grasps Heidegger's assertion of the "eventuality" of Being, his "enfeeblement of (the notion of) Being [though his emphasis on] the explicit occurrence of its temporal essence (which is also and especially ephemerality, birth and death, faded trans-mission, antiquarian accumulation)."[30] Key to this model of thinking is a shift towards conceptualizing the world "as the product of a history of interpretation throughout the history of human cultures," rather than as a collection of objectively knowable facts.[31] Of course, there is more that could be said of Vattimo's weak thought, but the particular focus here must remain on his engagement with the arts and the built environment as sources for models of ontological "weakness."

One of Vattimo's most crucial considerations of weakness is precisely through the notion of the monument, a form that one might presume to be tied to both deep and clear definitions of the meaning of history and Being. Vattimo explores this connection between the weak and the monumental in an essay entitled "Ornament/Monument," which is cited by nearly all curatorial and critical definitions of weak monumentality.[32] This essay examines Heidegger's thoughts on sculpture,[33] and thus engages crucially with questions of bodies and space. While Vattimo later pursues the question of monumentality as an architectural matter—and most subsequent engagements with weak monumentality are analyses of architectural phenomena—this initial engagement with sculpture privileges the scale of the human body, and foregrounds intimate forms of embodiment. I propose that we might be able to more precisely theorize the body's role in relation to weakness as a monumental characteristic if we consider, alongside Vattimo's approach to weak thought, one of the other analyses frequently discussed under the moniker of weak theory: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's adaptation of psychologist Silvan Tomkins' "weak affect theory."[34]

Although Sedgwick is not interested in monuments, her exploration of "paranoid readings" (based on "strong theories") and "reparative readings" (based on "weak theories") is surprisingly relevant for the contexts in which we encounter monuments today.[35] Historians and critics alike have an abiding tendency to offer what Sedgwick calls paranoid readings. That is, we tend to try to interpret monuments through a "hermeneutics of suspicion."[36] We attempt to approach them in ways that demystify or demythologize them, or otherwise aim to anticipate their ideological complicities and lay bare their role in various machinations (the propagation of state power, the reinforcement of nationalist identities, the embodiment of patriarchal social structures, and so forth). The action of iconoclasm is so often part of a paradoxical process of unmasking because the act of iconoclasm reveals the monument's vitality to be a deception (by reducing it to bare material, susceptible to destruction), at precisely the same time that it tacitly acknowledges the monument's power, the necessity of destroying it and ending its influence.[37] The iconoclastic gesture aimed at the monument, then, is a paradigmatic example of a paranoid gesture, in Sedgwick's sense:

30. Gianni Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," in *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Peri Aldo Rovatti (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 45.

31. Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, "'Weak Though' and the Reduction of Violence," trans. Yaakov Mascetti, *Common Knowledge* 8, no. 3 (Fall, 2002): 453.

32. Gianni Vattimo, "Ornament/Monument," in *The End of Modernity*, trans. John R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 79–89.

33. Martin Heidegger, "Art and Space," trans. Charles H. Seibert, *Continental Philosophy Review* 6, no. 1 (1973), 3–8

34. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

35. Sedgwick, 123–151.

36. The phrase comes from Paul Ricoeur, in the context of his readings of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, and is taken up by Sedgwick. See Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, 1970), 34.

it steadfastly refuses to be taken in, to be deceived. As a corollary to this, historians and critics alike often heroize those practices that aid in promoting skepticism and suspicion about any truth claims that might adhere in monuments: this is evidenced by the ongoing interest in (and critical preference for) various forms of counter-monuments and anti-monuments.

In contrast to strong theories based upon extending their reach and anticipating (through paranoid mimesis) possible deceptions, Sedgwick proposes the utility of reparative readings based upon weaker theories. For Sedgwick, a weak theory is one that succeeds precisely in its specificity to the physical and emotional relationships between very particular bodies in very particular situations, but goes no further.[38] In both time and space, weak theory allows for difference to emerge; it does not aim for the prediction of strong theories, and it does not seek to avoid negative affects the way that they do. Sedgwick's reparative interpretation seeks to find joy, pleasure, escape, or hope in the objects and people that give our lives meaning—not in any sweeping, ideal way, but instead precisely by turning to particular embodied responses and desires. Reparative readings are "ameliorative" and sometimes affirmative as well, and for this reason they run contrary to paranoid readings' drive to expose, uncover, and critique; they are also "additive and accretive."[39] Reparative interpretation situates itself primarily amongst "fragments and part-objects," both constructing new futures from them and recovering new aspects of the possibilities of the past.[40]

Too straightforward or enduring a dichotomy between paranoid and reparative readings becomes a kind of interpretive trap, of course.[41] What counts as a reparative approach to the past can only be defined historically. It depends upon re-readings and re-interpretations of heritage as well as the present, the situation that gives rise to Vattimo's project of weak thought. However, considering both paranoid and reparative responses to monumentality and public commemoration—so often associated with violence, or the incitement to violence—opens up new avenues of inquiry.[42] Among these new avenues are those methodological approaches defined by the closeness or narrowness of the objects that are interpreted by Sedgwick (following Tomkins) through the lens of weak theory. Weak monumentality is a set of propositions that arises from what seems (at least in much of the world) to be a universal condition: the enfeeblement of the claims made by monuments on public life, political power, and memory.

Weak monumentality is thus closely related to the phenomena of counter-monumentality and anti-monumentality,[43] but the former is distinct from the latter two precisely because it seeks to set aside the "oppositional models that are the legacy of the avant-garde"[44] and that underly counter-monumental logic. Counter-monuments—those "brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces designed to challenge the very premises" of monumentality[45]—came to prominence in postwar Germany, as a generation of artists sought ways to engage in the work of memory without recapitulating the nationalistic spatial rhetoric of official monumentality. These artists sought to invert the formal and material tropes associated

37. Joseph Leo Koerner, "On Monuments," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67/68 (2016/2017): 6.
38. Sedgwick, 144.
39. Sedgwick, 144–149
40. Sedgwick, 146..
41. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory," 440.
42. On the association of public art with violence, see W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: 'Do the Right Thing,'" *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (Summer, 1990): 880–899.
43. On the distinctions between counter-monuments and anti-monumentality, see Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck, and Ruth Fazakerley, "Counter-monuments: The Anti-monument and the Dialogic," *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 6 (2012): 951–972.
44. Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiv–xvi.
45. Young, "Counter-Monument," 271.

with the monument,[46] creating temporary works, or else ones that rejected the imposing visibility of earlier commemorative art. But we must also understand counter-monumentality today alongside the weakening of the traditional monument (that is, the waning of "a metaphysical belief in fixity and immortality"[47]), which counter-monuments partially helped enact. As Paul K. Saint-Amour argues, the notion of modernism as "aesthetic strength" generated "through iconoclasm and strenuous innovation" is essentially a defunct characterization that has been replaced by more nuanced, decentering, and affectively sensitive positions.[48] Paradoxically, it is the counter-monument that seems increasingly called upon to strenuously innovate in response to monumentality as an undesirable heritage. Some, for example, have proposed that the Confederate monuments of the United States can only be properly situated historically through the proliferation of counter-monuments (and not through removal or confinement in museums).[49] At the same time, the counter-monument—once a deconstructive gesture aimed at both authoritarian violence and nationalism—has sometimes become complicit in the paradigms it once deconstructed: its performances of radicality and abstraction have now also become expedient placeholders for more concrete political discussion or social change. The perceived cultural capital of counter-monumentality has allowed its re-absorption into nationalist agendas.[50]

IV. Re-inscription

Luiza Margan's *Eye to Eye with Freedom* and Nada Prlja's *Humanistic Communism* are both participatory interventions, and as such they belong to a broader turn in contemporary art towards performance and interaction, including as strategies for encountering the monumental. Mechtild Widrich has theorized the notion of "performative monuments" to describe this turn, which began as early as the 1970s, and includes both the counter-monuments of the 1980s and more recent ephemeral monuments orchestrated by artists like Thomas Hirschhorn.[51] Weak monumentality might indeed be subsumed under the category of performative monuments, but there is at least one important distinction: weak monumentality still takes, as it were, a monumental object. It does not seek to replace traditional monumentality with a new kind of monument or memory community (one generated, for example, solely through an ephemeral performance). Rather, it works in response to an existing monument—not to unmake its ideology, but to allow it to live on in a new way. One particularly compelling example of this approach is Albanian artist Armando Lulaj's massive work *NEVER*.

Lulaj's *NEVER* is many things: it is a large-scale intervention in the landscape (one could even call it land art); a video work that juxtaposes documentation of this intervention with archival video footage from Albania's socialist period; and a series of archival and documentary photographs related to the film and its object. The focus of Lulaj's intervention is a massive geoglyph located on the side of Mt. Shpirag, located near the southern Albanian city of Berat (a UNESCO site with ancient, Byzantine, and Ottoman

46. Sometimes this inversion was literal, as in the case of Horst Hoheisel's 1985 Aschrott Fountain, which reproduced the form of the eponymous fountain (destroyed by the Nazis in 1939) in Kassel's City Hall Square and sunk it into the ground, creating a precise negative form of the original monument.

47. Mumford, *Culture*, 439.

48. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory," 437–438.

49. See Andreas Huyssen's response to "A Questionnaire on Monuments," *October* 165 (Summer 2018): 69–71.

50. Elizabeth Strakosch, "Counter-Monuments and Nation-Building in Australia," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 22 (2010): 268–269.

51. Widrich, *Performative Monuments*, 8–10.

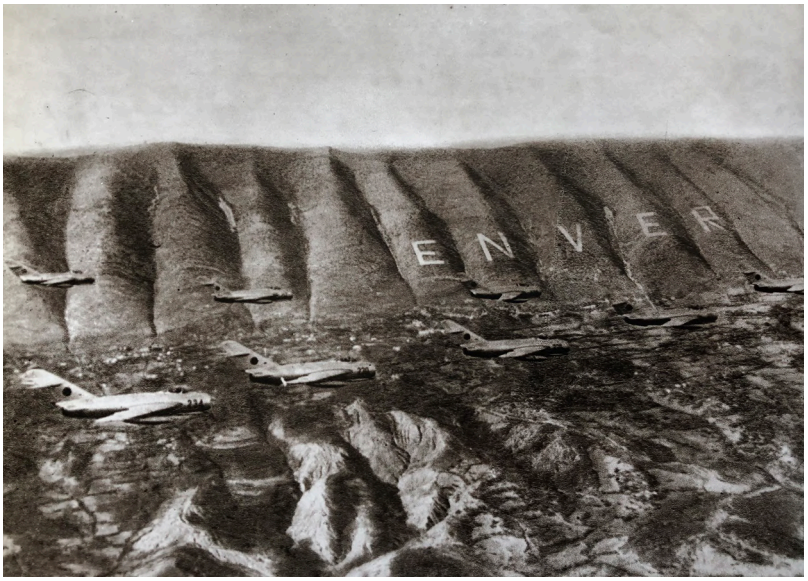

Figure 5. Photograph of Albanian fighter jets passing over the slopes of Mt. Shpirag. Published in *Ushtria Jonë Popullore* (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1984).

architecture). | **fig. 5** | In 1968, a group of soldiers from the People's Army of the Socialist Republic of Albania, together with socialist youth, painted the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha's name—ENVER—on massive stones dragged to the mountainside from the surrounding area, in letters 100 meters in height. This inscription in the landscape occurred at the height of the Albanian Cultural Revolution, carried out in partial conjunction with Mao's in the People's Republic of China, and indeed the geoglyph faced a wide valley that housed the Mao Zedong Textile Factory, built with Chinese aid as part of the alliance between the two socialist nations.

Lulaj explains the history of the geoglyph's creation, and its fate in the postsocialist period:

> [T]he socialist youth painted the rocks with white paint, and they returned to do so every year as a moral duty to the [communist] party until 1990. Four years later the Democratic Party was in power and at [Prime Minister] Sali Berisha's order, the army tried to destroy the sign. They used dynamite in order to pulverize the rocks, but after some falling debris destroyed some houses under the slopes, it became nearly impossible to continue. So they tr[ied] to use fire. With flame throwers they tried to burn the white surface off the rocks but this turned out to be another total failure. Two soldiers were burned alive and the sign was still visible. They left the sign for nature to cover over the years.[52]

When, in the 2010s, Lulaj began to conduct research into the monumental inscription, it had almost entirely disappeared from view. Lulaj set out to rediscover the geoglyph with the help of some of those who had created it, including a man named Sheme Filja, a resident of a village near Shpirag's slopes. Lulaj's video work *NEVER* begins with footage of Filja and a team of gradually ascending amidst the tall grass and rocky surfaces of the mountain slopes. The group is almost completely lost against the massive scale of Shpirag. | **figs. 6–8** | We see them surveying with a tachymeter, but the precise nature of their project is unknown. Their labor amidst the rocks, calling

52. Armando Lulaj and Department of Eagles, "Interview with Armando Lulaj," *Department of Eagles*, January 7, 2014, http://departmentofeagles.org/2014/interview-with-armando-lulaj/.

53. Marco Scotini, "The Science of Whales: Narratives of Power and the Invention of the Enemy," in *Armando Lulaj: Albanian Trilogy*, ed. Marco Scotini, 18.

Figures 6–7. Armando Lulaj, *NEVER*, 2012. Video, Full HD, B/W and Color, Sound, 22 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Debatik-Center Film.

Figure 8. Armando Lulaj, *NEVER*, 2012. Video, Full HD, B/W and Color, Sound, 22 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, Debatik Center Film, and Paolo Maria Deanesi Gallery.

back and forth to each other in their efforts to discover or measure the obscure object of their search.

It is only later in the film, when Lulaj intercuts an archival sequence of footage of Albanian fighter pilots flying over the mountain—and the ENVER geoglyph—that we realize what the team is seeking, what they are clearing away and repainting. As curator Marco Scotini writes, "once [the geoglyph is] identified as the subject of the inquiry and the investigation on the slopes of Mount Shpirag, it is presumed that the rest of the video will be concerned with the discovery of the material hidden in the soil, [...] with the consequent repositioning of the original inscription in stone..."[53] However, what appears as the result of the ongoing labor of surveying and clearing-away is in fact something very different. At the close of the film, what becomes visible on the slopes of Shpirag—and indeed what is still there for visitors to the region to see, is not the former dictator's name, but instead its anagram, the English adverb *NEVER*. Thus, what first appears to be a process of archaeological recovery—or perhaps of restoration—becomes instead an act of rewriting that transforms the meaning of the original geoglyph, giving it a new form, even as it simultaneously reminds viewers of the existence of what was there before.

It is this paradoxical intertwinement of recovery and re-inscription that *NEVER* wants to make apparent, and that aligns the work with the kinds of conceptual trajectories I have labelled as weak monumentality. Lulaj has said that *NEVER* is "not a kind of negation of Enver, the dictator's name." Rather, the work is related more broadly to the "condition of absolutism" in neoliberal capitalism. This absolutism, Lulaj argues, wears the "guise of democracy," espousing the notion that democracy "includes all possibilities" and occludes any other alternatives[54] In other words, the post-socialist era did not bring an end to the kind of efforts at eternalization and ideological totality that often characterized socialist modernity—it merely brought with it new supposedly all-encompassing values. *NEVER* thus functions not so much as a counter-monument as it does an effort to recover the socialist era's monumentality while also transforming it into a critique of the present. It returns to the monument as a catalyst to remember other systems and other legacies, but without simply nostalgically recapitulating them.

V. Conclusion

As I suggested at the outset, the works of the artists discussed here—if we are to read them as something like weak monumentality—are importantly tied to a particular legacy of the socialist built environment (and specifically commemorative structures) and its continued material existence in Southeastern Europe. All these works address, in one way or another, the potential that the Partisan legacy of antifascist resistance might offer in the present—but they certainly do not do so by simply using these monuments as loci for new collective revolutionary mobilization. Instead, they form part of the effort to combat ongoing political (and capitalist) efforts to equate

54. Armando Lulaj, "Interview with Armando Lulaj," *Public Delivery*, 2014, http://publicdelivery.org/armando-lulaj/#arve-load-video.

55. Kristen Ghodsee, "A Tale of 'Two Totalitarianisms': The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism," *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 117.

Figure 9. Liane Lang, *Support Group*, 2009. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

the fascist past with the communist one as comparable historical traumas, which have the effect of "t[ying] all leftist political ideals to the horrors of Stalinism."[55] By taking care, re-inscribing, and revisiting, artists like Margan, Prlja, and Lulaj show us monuments as objects that no longer exercise the domineering power they once possessed, and as such they begin to take on the same vulnerabilities as human bodies and human ideals. Of course, the particular monumental heritage these works address is very different from other bodies of monumental sculpture that are currently the focus of debate in the world—such as Confederate statues in the United States, or monuments to colonial power spread across formerly colonized geographies. Nonetheless, weak monumentality calls precisely for specificity, for understanding the particularity of interactions and experiences in relation to monuments, and for respecting the emotional claims that certain objects of heritage make upon us.

As noted at the outset, however, I put forward the concept of weak monumentality in this article precisely in order to suggest—for future analyses, ones broader in scope than I can hope to offer here—the concept's applicability in a wider variety of artistic contexts. Certainly, other artists from the former East almost immediately suggest themselves for analysis within this framework. The video trilogy *Scenes for a New Heritage* (created between 2004 and 2006) and numerous associated collages by Croatian artist David Maljković, in which the artist imagines various alternative futures for Vojin Bakić's massive, socialist-era modernist monument on the forested mountaintop at Petrova Gora, is one clear example. A bit further afield, but still within the scope of postsocialist engagements with socialist-era monumentality, we might also consider the photograph *Support Group*

(2009), | **fig. 9** | one of a series of similar photographs collectively entitled Monumental Misconceptions, created by the German-born artist Liane Lang as part of a residency at Budapest's Memento Park. *Support Group* depicts a female body cradled in the arms of Zsigmond Strobl's *Hungarian Soviet Friendship Monument*. At first sight, the body appears to be that of the artist, but it is in fact simply a cast of the artist's body, a surrogate that both questions and asserts the possibility of an intimate encounter with monumental forms—with the work's title at once playfully and seriously drawing attention to monuments as physical and emotional supports. Reaching even further, we might extend the notion of weak monumentality to describe the vulnerability yet earnestness of a work like Cassils' *Monument Push* (2017), in which the artist joined together with members of Omaha, Nebraska's queer community to push a massive bronze sculpture entitled *Resilience of the 20%* to various sites of violence and resistance. The sculpture, a cast remnant from Cassils' earlier performance *Becoming an Image*—in which the artist physically attacks a 2 000-pound monolith of clay in total darkness—indexes the trauma and the vulnerability of the body, even as it also asserts its resilience. (The title makes statistical reference to the increase in the percentage of murders of trans people in the year 2012).

In these and other works by contemporary artists, the monument is not simply an index of ontological strength, or a symbol of oppressive authority—it becomes the site of a reckoning with ideals and their vulnerability. From these artists, we learn to see monuments—and ourselves—as in need of repair, sympathy, and care. We learn to attend to our capacity to feel, not simply our capacity to deconstruct the ideologies of the past. Through emphasizing monumentality as intertwined with weakness, artists project new grounds for embodied memories, suggesting that even the most monolithic and legible monuments are still amenable to both physical intervention and the introduction of new narratives and commemorative practices. ¶