

**Federico Bellentani, *The Meanings of the Built Environment: A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021, 188 pp. 88 b/w illus., \$ 114 US (hardcov.) ISBN 9783110614459, \$ 114.59 US (eBook) ISBN 9783110617276**

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Volume 46, Number 2, 2021

“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 ?

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085428ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085428ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Deschepper, J. (2021). Review of [Federico Bellentani, *The Meanings of the Built Environment: A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021, 188 pp. 88 b/w illus., \$ 114 US (hardcov.) ISBN 9783110614459, \$ 114.59 US (eBook) ISBN 9783110617276].

*RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 46(2), 127–130.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1085428ar>

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the book, she cites, however briefly, important contemporary Black writers including Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, and W.E.B. Du Bois for grounding the racial and social threads of her historical journey. The book also resonates with Araujo's own writing trajectory. Since 2008, she has published several books<sup>1</sup> that connect her interests across history and art and are also relevant to subjects discussed here, such as public memory of slavery, artistic ventures in colonial Brazil, and colonial heritage; *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*, is an organic result of this long path of interdisciplinary investigation. Looking at the author's bibliography, her interest in the mutability of representations of the past (28) becomes clear, but I wonder, in the midst of such traumatic memories: "what if colonization and trans-Atlantic slavery had never occurred?"<sup>2</sup> I do miss an approach that attends to non-linear perceptions of time, which are all so present in African and Afro-diasporic approaches to memory: Afrofuturism could have contributed much to this study. This Afro-centred movement that was born in the twentieth century sheds light on fundamental agendas for Black liberation, as it rescues ancient traditions while "wielding the imagination for personal change and societal growth."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, in the sixth and final chapter, "Art of Memory", Araujo presents an excellent set of anti-colonial contemporary artists that deal with similar inquiries. Cyprien Tokoudagba, Romuald Hazoumè, William-Adjeté Wilson, Rosana Paulino, Nona Faustine, and François Pique all originate from territories involved in the Atlantic slave trade and have artistic practices that relate to these memories. The author situates their artworks in relation to the colonial memoirs that keep haunting our contemporary times, hindering Black lives and perpetuating racism. Through the (re)vision and (re)construction

of Afro-diasporic and African memories, Black contemporary art has been "probably the most comprehensive instrument to engage with the various dimensions of the slave past" (95). In this sense, Araujo resonates with important contemporary thinkers who elicit Black futures through art, such as Rinaldo Walcott, who believes Black art has the potential for disrupting a global grammar of Black suffering.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in the epilogue there is a brief recap of the book's main ideas, leading to the affirmation that "memory activates the past in the present. In its range of modalities (collective, cultural, public, and official)" (105), memories of slavery vary, or have many dimensions, "depending on whether the group is composed of slave traders, slave owners, or enslaved individuals, and whether these men and women relate to each other" (105). This affirmation triggers an intriguing perspective in which collective memory deriving from "slavery and the Atlantic slave trade is multi-dimensional" (105). The author's effort to rescue layers of erased Black memories and to uproot distorted white narratives initiates many necessary confrontations with white supremacist legacies, resulting in an assertive and provocative compilation of previously concealed histories.

The book is an important contribution to the analysis of Atlantic slave trade memory and its continued implications in current social contexts, especially regarding historic public spaces and memory institutions. Ana Lucia Araujo's writing foresees a new iconoclastic turn of our contemporary times, with crescent waves of destruction of historical monuments linked to the colonial slavery past that are happening now in the collapsed pandemic scenario, worldwide. By engaging the past as a way to dissolve hegemonic memory, the book adds force to the urgent recognition of Black public history and to international

efforts to promote human rights and a more equitable collective memory. ¶

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1. Her more historical endeavors, connecting the Atlantic slave trade arc with the debates on public memories, include *Living History: Encountering the Memory of the Heirs of Slavery* (2009), *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (2010), *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (2012), *Paths of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Interactions, Identities and Images*, (2011), *Crossing Memories: Slavery and African Diaspora* (2011), *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (2014), *African Heritage and Memories of Slavery in Brazil and the South Atlantic World* (2015), and, more recently, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History* (2017). Her mostly art historical approach can be found in *Romantisme tropical: l'aventure illustrée d'un peintre français au Brésil* (2008) and its subsequent English and Portuguese versions: *Brazil through the French Eyes: A Nineteenth-Century Artist in the Tropics* (2015) and *Romantismo tropical: Um pintor francês nos trópicos* (2017), respectively.

2. Joana Joachim, "SPECULATIONS," curatorial essay (Montreal: Artexte, 2019), [https://e-arte.ca/id/eprint/30941/1/Speculations\\_v3\\_EN.pdf](https://e-arte.ca/id/eprint/30941/1/Speculations_v3_EN.pdf)

3. Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

4. Rinaldo Walcott, "The Black Aquatic: On Water, Art and Black Movement," webinar, Women and Gender Studies Institute of the University of Toronto speaking series, 2020, <https://wgsi.utoronto.ca/the-black-aquatic-on-water-art-and-black-movement/>

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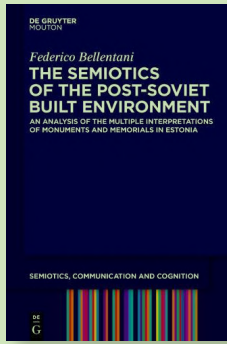
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Julie Deschepper

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Federico Bellentani's first monograph, *The Meanings of the Built Environment. A Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in the Post-Soviet Era*, focuses on the contemporary meaning-making of monuments and memorials in one Post-Soviet



country, Estonia. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 involved, inevitably, new reactions towards the material remains of the Soviet regime, especially towards those visible in the urban space. These reactions have been incredibly diverse and diverge greatly from one country to another. The case of Estonia aroused Bellentani's interest because of the intensity of the debates and the ferocity of the conflicts that have taken place there since the early 2000s related to the new interpretations and solutions around Soviet monuments, also called the "war of monuments." Given the recent wave of contestation of public monuments glorifying difficult and traumatizing pasts, especially colonial and racist legacies, that has occurred on a global scale following the murder of George Floyd, this publication is a timely addition to the literature on such monuments. Indeed, while Bellentani focuses on one country, he proposes an innovative approach towards monuments that could be extended to other post-Soviet countries as well as to non-transitional societies.

The book is divided into two parts that are, respectively, conceptual and empirical. The first part, "Semiotic and Geographical Approach to Monuments in Transitional Societies," develops the book's main theoretical lines. Bellentani's starting point is that both cultural geography and semiotics, as disciplines, have limitations in the analysis of

monuments. To explain this intriguing statement, he reviews in chapters two and three the traditional and most frequently cited literature, emphasizing what their authors did not do, or did not do enough. Together with the introduction, these chapters stand as a great first acquaintance with both disciplines, especially for neophytes. The two principal issues identified by Bellentani are the under-theorization of the relation between designers and users of monuments, on the one hand, and the neglect of the relation between the plastic and figurative levels of monuments and their meanings, on the other.

To go beyond these limitations, Bellentani proposes to connect cultural geography and semiotics, and to move towards, in his wording, a "holistic approach" to the built environment, which "should consider the cultural geographical world in which forms are located and interpreted, addressing how the built environment shapes cultural meanings, relations, paradigms and practices" (2). To him, this theoretical framework makes it possible to better analyze the multiple meanings of monuments. Applying this approach in considering both already existing and newly built monuments and memorials in Estonia, the book focuses on the potential gaps between designers' intentions and users' interpretations of monumental productions. Bellentani relevantly explores the visual, plastic, and political dimensions of monuments. One of the strengths of the book is, then, to provide a theoretical framework for an issue that researchers of monuments have been writing about for decades now: all monuments are political and they always convey a chosen, dominant historical narrative that can, however, be misunderstood and/or contested through time.

If the approach combining semiotics and geography seems innovative, the fact that other disciplines that have extensively produced

research on monuments—including history, art history, anthropology, sociology, and political science—are not mentioned, is quite surprising. Moreover, entire fields of research such as memory and heritage studies have also, inevitably, been dedicating part of their scholarly production to monuments and should have been invoked, especially as they are by essence multidisciplinary, integrating geographical and semiotic approaches. Another absence of references is even more astonishing, and that is to the extensive study of socialist monuments in post-socialist contexts, especially because over the past two decades this has been considered a separate field of research, often referred to as the field of "socialist heritage."<sup>1</sup> These references could have been useful throughout the book to place the Estonian case—which is already quite well researched—in a broader perspective, and to emphasize and give greater nuance to its specificities.

Chapter three reads like a short history of Estonia, and of its political, cultural and urban contexts, insisting on the fact that Estonia is a transitional society. With chapter four, we move to another scale as Bellentani proposes a typology of what he defines as the "cultural reinvention" of monuments, in Estonia and beyond. This expression refers to a set of practices that are used to implement and convey a new cultural or political context. In this chapter, Bellentani identifies eight sets of practices, giving examples in other socialist contexts (Bulgaria, Ukraine, GDR), outside socialism (US, UK, Iraq, Syria, Libya), and also in other temporal frameworks (the Middle Ages). If the ambition to be global is admirable, these examples are only briefly mentioned without a clear analysis or comparison, while the contexts are sometimes so radically different that it could have been helpful for the reader to have a little more information.

The second part of the book examines in great detail four cases that reflect various types or stages of such “cultural reinventions” in Estonia. This section reads particularly pleasantly and is especially well-conceived. The four chapters are structured similarly, with a short table summarizing all the case’s details, a chronological description of the events surrounding its construction, an analysis of the case within the theoretical framework provided in Part A, and an illustrated conclusion, with graphics (drawings) at the end that summarize the main ideas developed. One other quality of the book is that Bellentani provides valuable detail on every monument, such as its budget, the names of the political, social, and economic actors involved, descriptions of the design project, and especially interviews with the artists and the users. Bellentani’s methodology is indeed exhaustive and includes fieldwork, interviews, observations and study of documentation.

Bellentani starts with the conflicts around the removal and displacement of the so-called “Bronze Soldier” in Tallinn, which is surely the most well-known case he analyzes. This affair is not only one of the major conflicts of the so-called “war of monuments,” but is also a milestone in Estonian history. It has aroused media as well as an academic interest inside and outside Estonia, given what is at stake: memory issues, divergent understandings of the Second World War and of the Soviet experience; division of the Estonian society, especially between the Russophone and non-Russophone community; civic tensions, including the tragic death of a young boy; and diplomatic relations between Estonia and Russia. Bellentani’s contribution to the analysis of this crisis demonstrates that the tensions raised by the removal of the monument were part of a political struggle rather than an ethnic one alone.

The second case he explores is the most fascinating. The chapter is dedicated to the controversies around the War of Independence Victory Column, erected in Tallinn in 2009 by the Estonian Ministry of Defense. It examines the disjunctions between the goals of the planners and designers and the receptions by its users. Imagined as a highly symbolic reference easily interpreted by Estonians, it mostly failed its aims, and has been widely criticized both from an aesthetic and political perspective. The misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the Cross of Liberty that tops this gigantic, glass-paneled monument, together with the monument’s overall form, sometimes associated with Soviet or Nazi aesthetic, are the main issues Bellentani identifies. His description of the confrontations between the Estonian Russophone and non-Russophone community are extremely interesting, and the chapter provides nuance that helps to correct preconceived ideas about Estonian society. Moreover, the details on the building process, its actors and costs, but also its failures, such as the replacement of dolomite by glass panels, as well as the attention paid to the intentions of the artists, are very useful. The fact that participatory design methods were not applied, here or in the case of the bronze soldier, is to Bellentani the basis of the ensuing conflicts. On the contrary, in the last two chapters, he shows how the participation of the public in the construction of a monument can lead to successful and harmonious solutions, even in places where tensions could easily arise.

In the case of the memorials of Maarjamäe, discussed in chapter seven, no conflict occurred at all, even though the multiple layers of memory and meanings existing there could have triggered it. This landscape and architectural ensemble of 30,000 square meters consists of two memorial complexes: a Soviet memorial dedicated to fallen

World War Two soldiers (originally supposed to celebrate Estonian history more broadly) and a brand-new one opened in 2018 to honour the victims of communism in Estonia. Bellentani’s description of the interactions between the monuments, and his analysis of their coexistence and of their uses by the public, is enlightening, especially to better grasp the conflicting historical narratives materially present in the urban space. The last chapter tells the story of the Kissing Students monument erected in 1998 at the center of a fountain in Tartu. In this case, Bellentani explores the perfect coherence between the designers’ intentions and the user’s perceptions. Indeed, this monument is not contested at any level. However, Bellentani explains, its cute figurative aspect does not mean that the monument is not political: it is used as a new symbol of the city, as its “synecdoche.” This “marketization” of a monument, linked with the multiplication of non-conflicting and perfectly “non-confrontational public statues” (159) in the post-Soviet context, could have been explored and further analyzed.

The book achieves its two ambitions: to address the often divergent relations that designers and users have with monuments, and to depict the interaction between the aesthetic and material qualities of the monuments and their meanings. Nevertheless, while Bellentani succeeds in these ways and explores many important issues, his text often remains on a descriptive level, and there are occasional repetitions. The reader often waits for developments, conceptualizations, and more precise comparisons that could add to the already existing literature on these cases, as well as on the practices he mentions. One point that could have been interesting to scrutinize is the similarities (or not) of practices used by citizens to contest the presence of a monument based on the different case studies. Finally, the heritage status



of these monuments is only sometimes mentioned, and the precise study of their (de)heritagization processes could have given fruitful results. Bellentani concludes his book with two suggestions on how to deal with controversial monuments today. First, and very interestingly, he emphasizes the importance of both participatory methods and digital technology when approaching the design and cultural reinvention of monuments to better deal with the multiplicity of interpretations monuments always carry. Second, he states that “planning and design are inevitably political, but they should not be politics” (171), which might be, if not contradictory with the reality he describes, a bit optimistic. Overall, the book proves how useful it is to consider the post-socialist space when trying to make sense of the recent debates on controversial monuments, and how inspiring this can be when thinking about the afterlives of a newly contested heritage. ¶

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1. Here is a short selection: Sheila Watson, “The Legacy of Communism: Difficult Histories, Emotions and Contested Narratives,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 7 (2018): 781–794; Francisco Martinez, *Remains of the Soviet Past in Estonia, An Anthropology of Forgetting, Repair and Urban Traces* (London: uCL Press, 2018); Francesco Iacono, “Revolution and counter-Revolution: or why it is difficult to have a heritage of communism and what can we do about it,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 5 (2018): 507–521; Laura Ingerpuu, “Socialist Architecture as Today’s Dissonant Heritage: Administrative Buildings of Collective Farms in Estonia,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 9 (2018): 954–968.

Fred Evans  
**Public Art and the Fragility of Democracy: An Essay in Political Aesthetics**

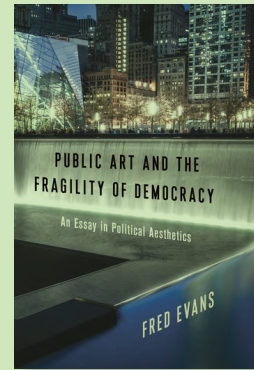
New York: Columbia University Press, 2018/2021

342 pp. 22 b/w illus.  
\$ 75 US (hardcover) ISBN 9780231187589  
\$ 30 US (paper, 2021) ISBN 9780231187596  
\$ 29.99 US (eBook, 2018)  
ISBN 9780231547369

Felicia F. Leu

What role does public art play in reinforcing democracy and resisting autocratic tendencies in society? Raising this question is imperative during a period in which democracy is repeatedly being exposed to threats from white supremacists and others and in which, at the same time, more and more of the monuments that have enshrined racist beliefs are being brought down in the decolonial spirit. In doing so, Fred Evans, professor emeritus of philosophy at Duquesne University, provides an exceptionally relevant and compelling publication concerning public art in the US. His extremely well researched “essay in political aesthetics” invites its readers to reflect on how public art, characterized as “any artistic creation that has the intent or effect of addressing democratic values and occurs in public spaces” (10), can be a force in “shaping our views of democracy” (2) and “motivating citizens to participate in civic activities” (14).

Evans’s remarkable philosophical account is a valuable contribution to the vast body of interdisciplinary literature on the entanglements of democracy and public art. For, what renders Evans’s book unique is his development of an inspiring systematic criterion to evaluate “public artworks as acts of citizenship” (8), qualifying as the latter when they “augment democratic tendencies” (231), either by direct “innovative affirmations” or resistance to “white



supremacy and other nihilistic oracles” (235). His publication excels through a new and fruitful way of imagining the complex constitution of the public involved in public art, namely through the primary notion of the voice with its traits of audibility, specificity, and flexibility, based on his stimulating volume *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity* (2009). The author characterizes the public sphere through the interplay of diverse and agonistic voices, in which “voices are never merely persons talking to one another” but “vocal forces” expressing social discourses (35). This “multivoiced body” as society’s fundament is elaborated regarding public art in the first two chapters as an outstanding conceptual ground for his criterion. Within its eight chapters, building upon each other, and with reference to a great many philosophers, art critics, and other thinkers, the publication succeeds through the author’s impressive ability to make the theorists’ different voices talk to each other to relate their ideas to various examples of public art, and to give intelligibility to their complex notions of politics and aesthetics as he develops his conclusions.

The initial chapter, entitled “Democracy’s Fragility and the Political Aesthetics of Public Art,” revolves around the “dilemma of diversity” (12). Evans considers democracy to be strong and fragile