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Monument as process. Contemporary art practices and controversial memories in the present Bosnia and Herzegovina

Alice Devecchi*

Abstract

The recent history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the legacy of 1990-1995 war, is one of the most controversial in Europe. In the last 30 years, a disputable process of monumentalisation of memories, decided from above, has further nurtured ethnic hatred and nationalisms. In such a context, a large part of Bosnian artists has taken the responsibility to question the traditional concept of monument and adopted participatory practices addressed at sharing painful memories with and within communities. In the effort to account memory as a process, they seek strategies to transform monuments in processes as well. The contribution presents the work of three Bosnian artists, personally met by the author in Sarajevo, highlighting their activist attitude towards the issue of memory and monuments in post war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

La storia recente della Bosnia ed Erzegovina, segnata dall'eredità della guerra del 1990-1995, è tra le più controverse d'Europa. Negli ultimi trent'anni, un discutibile processo di monumentalizzazione delle memorie, deciso dall'alto, ha ulteriormente alimentato odio etnico e nazionalismi. In un simile contesto, una larga parte degli artisti bosniaci si è as-

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sunta la responsabilità di mettere in discussione il concetto tradizionale di monumento e di adottare pratiche partecipative volte a condividere memorie dolorose con e all'interno delle comunità. Partendo dalla concezione della memoria come processo, essi cercano strategie per trasformare anche i monumenti in processi. Il contributo presenta il lavoro di tre artisti bosniaci, incontrati personalmente dall'autrice a Sarajevo, mettendo in evidenza il loro atteggiamento attivista nei confronti della questione della memoria e dei monumenti nella Bosnia ed Erzegovina (BiH) del dopoguerra.

1. *Introduction*

The recent history of Balkans, especially of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) with the cruel 1990-1995 war, the 1395 days siege of Sarajevo, the atrocities and crimes perpetrated on civilians with the aim of ethnic cleansing culminated in the Srebrenica Genocide, is one of the most controversial in Europe. A famous statement attributed to Winston Churchill says that Balkans produced more history than they can consume. Different accounts of the cause-effect relationship in war events, a now recognised mystification of the very nature of the conflict, and a strong polarisation among the three ethnoreligious groups involved (Bosniak Muslims, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs), have been exacerbated by 30 years of a "Frankenstein state"¹ with «three presidents, two entities and one independent district, 10 cantons, more than 150 ministers at different levels, and a number of members of parliament that is hard to count»². That's left a difficult inheritance to Bosnian people. Apart from the uncountable losses of human lives, the destruction of a multilayered and multiethnic cultural heritage in BiH during the war was large scale and systematic³. And its reconstruction, albeit part of the healing process for the Bosnian community, is still today at the center of controversies and exposed to the risk of being itself contended by the three main ethnic groups, thus reflecting exclusive memories and meanings.

¹ Bosnia-Herzegovina is an independent state which is partially under international oversight under the terms of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords which ended the 1992-95 Bosnian war and the break-up of Yugoslavia. The country comprises two autonomous entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska - and the Brcko District, which is governed by its own local government. These come under a federal government and rotating presidency. The chair of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the presiding member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which collectively serves as the country's head of state. The chair rotates every eight months between a Serb, a Muslim, and a Croat. The responsibilities of the presidency lie largely in international affairs. In addition, the Muslim-Croat entity and the Bosnian Serb Republic each have their own presidents. The three members elected at any one election serve a collective four-year term.

² Ahmetašević 2015.

³ Hadžimuhamedović 2019.

This contribution stems from the experience of attending the 7th Kuma International Summer School in Sarajevo. Kuma International is a non profit organisation founded in 2018 in Sarajevo by Claudia Zini dedicated to exploring and teaching the role of art practices in reconciliation of conflicts and healing from trauma⁴. The summer school is one of Kuma educational initiatives, which gathers in Sarajevo people from across the world providing platform to investigate on the role of art in times of crisis. Invited speakers are artists and scholars who survived in besieged Sarajevo and other parts of the country, or managed to escape passing through perils and unimaginable pain, or lived in refugee camps during the war; much of them are sons of the Bosnian *diaspora* and came back to BiH only recently with the urgent need to work on the sensitive issue of memorialisation of war-related facts. Some of them are focused on healing their own trauma and elaborating their own painful memories; some others see themselves more as facilitators of collaborative processes for coping with collective wounds. Anyway, all of them are obsessed with memory, with the fear that their memories of the war, individual and/or belonging to their community, could be erased or re-written by a superimposed narrative that eludes the critical question: who has the “right” memory of the war?

In a context of at least three different narratives of the same events and polarised positions on which of them is worth being celebrated with public monuments and where, many Bosnian artists seek strategies to counteract a top down process of monumentalisation of memories which in the last 30 years has further nurtured ethnic hatred and nationalisms. The generation of artists working in the aftermath of the war and since today address a broader tendency to question the traditional notion of monument. In contemporary art, monuments are increasingly being transformed from static objects into bottom-up processes open to communities, in the effort to redefine the relationship between memory and its tangible traces⁵. The negation of monumentalisation via anti or counter monument strategies has proven ineffective in most cases as respect the healing process that artists expected for themselves and their communities⁶. They seek alternatives to memorialisation by proposing artistic interventions that build new collective rituals, eluding the typical forms of exclusion embodied by traditional monuments.

In the following, a few examples of practices by bosnian artists invited at Kuma are presented, with the aim of highlighting how much their art can contribute not only to heal post war traumas but also to keep the debate about

⁴ I was among the 28 participants from across Europe, including Ukraine, Palestine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia of the 7th edition of Kuma International Summer School, 22-30 July 2024. Read more about Kuma International on <<https://kumainternational.org/>>, 24.03.2025

⁵ An in-depth discussion of the problematic issue of the relationship between monuments and memories today can be found in Pinotti 2023.

⁶ Čvoro 2021.

controversial memories alive and giving birth to new narratives of such a difficult history.

2. The controversial issue of memory and its monumentalisation in post war Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Dayton Peace Accord was signed in 1995 after three years and a half of war⁷. President of Serbia Slobodan Milošević, President of Croatia Franjo Tuđman, President of Bosnia Herzegovina Alija Izetbegović – witnessed by Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González, US President Bill Clinton, French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, UK Prime Minister John Major and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin – painstakingly negotiated an agreement which drew on desk the new borders of the main two constituent entities of BiH: the Bosniak Croat Federation and the Serb dominated Republika Srpska. The majority of Bosnian people refers that even after three decades the war has actually never ended, by this meaning that the Dayton Accord failed in reconciling the ethnic conflict and instead, being determined from above, contributed to make BiH one of the most divided post conflict societies in the XXI century, with ethnic division enshrined in its constitution⁸.

In such a context, cultural heritage has a specific role. Most of the built heritage of BiH, which was widely known as a particularly rich one witnessing a history of ethnoreligious diversity and multicultural coexistence, was – often intentionally – destroyed during the war and then reconstructed not always in a philological way. The case of Sarajevo is meaningful in this respect. As Gruia Bădescu writes:

Post-Dayton religious architecture in Sarajevo firmly shaped a new, segregated geography of religious rites, including intensive construction of mosques, and to some extent Catholic Churches, in the Federation city, and Orthodox churches in East Sarajevo. This spatial clustering was very different from the historic townscape of juxtaposed different religious buildings originating in the late Ottoman period⁹.

Furthermore, newly built monuments became in most cases instruments of ethnonationalists to convey partisan narratives and mystify memories of

⁷ The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) or Dayton Accords, is the peace agreement reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, United States, in November 1995, and formally signed in Paris on 14 December 1995.

⁸ Bieber 2020.

⁹ Bădescu 2021, p. 130.

the war. Art historian and curator Irfan Hošić illustrates the complexity of the situation adding that the massive monuments' production in BiH after 1995 is «decentralized, provincialized and part of the suspicious client politics and corruptive schemes of administrative procedures of the newly established state»¹⁰.

To comprehend how disputable is the treatment of memory in post war BiH, it's worth reading the words of Uros Čvoro, Bosnian born art theorist who devoted his research to the complex issue of monuments in his country of origin. He writes: «BiH is confronted with the co-existence of three mutually exclusive "official" narratives that dominate its culture of remembrance, whilst simultaneously disputing each other's claim of ownership over the space and time of the country»¹¹.

Čvoro was also invited speaker at 7th Kuma International Summer School and, in that occasion, he went as far as to question the very need of monuments and memorials that, in their proliferation, pave the way to the revision of history after three decades from the end of the war. Post war monuments in BiH come to life already controversial because they bear memories, celebrate heroes and validate truths of one part at the expense of the others. They are exclusive by nature. It's quite known the case of Peter Handke statue, a monument to the genocide denier, controversial writer, and advocate of Slobodan Milosevic's regime erected in 2021 in the center of Banja Luka, the largest city of Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity. Another example is the Serb nationalist three-finger salute monument near Zvornik, which was unveiled in 2017 proximate to a site of mass executions of Bosniaks. In the Federation, most monuments are dedicated to the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH) or the Croatian Defense Council (HVO), depending on whether Bosniaks or Croats are the ethnic majority in the respective region. Well known is the case of the lily monument dedicated to the ARBiH built in the ethnically divided city of Mostar in 2012 next to the monument commemorating the HVO soldiers, then bombed and destroyed in 2013¹².

One aspect that emerged from almost every artist's talk at Kuma is the discomfort towards the usual conceptualisation of monument as the Latin *monumentum*, derivative of *monere*, i.e. to remind (and warn). Anne Bordeleau notes that if we account also the word *munimentum* – i.e. a defensive wall, a protection – as origin of monument, its meaning oscillates between reminding and defending¹³. Reminding events and people; defending supposed truths and versions of facts. But what events, which heroes, and which one of the different truths? Carna Pistan stresses that in the case of BiH the above mentioned

¹⁰ Hošić 2024, p.18.

¹¹ Čvoro 2021, p. 1.

¹² See Dražeta 2025.

¹³ Bordeleau 2021, p. 14.

Constitution itself legitimises the controversial memorialisation initiatives justifying and perpetuating regimes of division¹⁴.

In the expectation that an auspicious state-level legislation on memorialisation is adopted, Bosnian artists presented here seek alternatives that allow to escape from taking an exclusive position, giving room to an open dialogue with the public, beyond divisions and free from prejudice.

3. *The activist attitude of Bosnian artists towards memory and monuments*

In a context of divergent memories, a monument is something too fixed and definitive in time and space. Traditionally made of durable materials and built upon symbolic sites, a monument conveys a permanent message, meant as an eternal reminder of what happened there. However, remembering is a complex process.

In a war torn society, at constant risk of further division, the rhetoric of a collective memory to be preserved falls short, being always the result of an authoritarian and partisan imposition. Indeed, the alternative to reminding isn't forgetting. The need of reparation and healing is still greatly felt and thus most Bosnian artists has taken them as a social responsibility since the end of the war. Keeping a critical position and with an activist attitude, they seek strategies to shift from monuments and memorials to processes of active remembrance. In many cases the challenge they take is to start and then nurture the complicated process of sharing memories, in the conviction that the boundary between individual and collective memories is a permeable threshold.

The case of BiH is a prime example – albeit not the only one – of the role artists can have in this respect. Nonetheless, it's notable that post war *artivism* in BiH seems the natural prosecution of artists' engagement during the war itself. It's well known the story of besieged Sarajevo, where more than 3000 cultural and artistic events were organised in the attempt to resist the brutality of the siege by keeping a glimmer of normality¹⁵. In the aftermath of the war and since today, many artists have inherited this attitude, addressing remembrance as another aspect of the deprivation they suffered, one from which they still risk being deprived.

With Horvath and Rawski, they trace *pathways to agonism* «capable of reopening symbolic spaces and providing opportunities for individuals and communities to imagine and discuss alternative, unprecedented, often mul-

¹⁴ Pistan 2023, <<https://verfassungsblog.de/why-are-illiberal-monuments-legally-possible-some-insights-from-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>> 21.08.2025.

¹⁵ About the role of art and culture in the besieged Sarajevo see, among others, Caira, Caviglioli 2021.

tiperspectivist ways of memorialising the past»¹⁶. The following are just few cases – and limited to BiH – among the many that could be cited. Still they are meaningful examples of the strategies devised by artists and cultural practitioners for resisting, questioning and diversifying «monolithic nationalistic narratives related to territorial disputes»¹⁷ in past and recent conflicts.

3.1. *Mak Hubjer*, NŠŠ1, 2017

Mak Hubjer is a visual and performative artist born in 1993 in besieged Sarajevo, raised there and now based in Zagreb. His work revolves around the relationship between public space, memory and monuments, he investigates through a set of interventions both in public places and in his studio. He takes action around existing urban monuments of Sarajevo and beyond putting their meaning - and their very existence – into question by way of simple gestures such as cleaning and packaging. Hubjer is moved by the observation of the state of abandonment or degradation of public monuments (equally from the socialist era or built after the war), which – he claims – keep the traces of *urbicide*, i.e. the systematic assault to cities perpetrated by “city haters” addressed to extinguish urbanity through the destruction of the built environment¹⁸. Hubjer consideration is that urban monuments are neglected not because of indifference or incivility. Instead, the deterioration talks much about their nature of controversial memories in a divided society. He states:

Conscious that the links between identity and monuments are by definition borders – not only socio-political but also cultural and semiotic – and that these links refer to imaginary spaces that vary between each community with a claim to them, I have decided to propose alternative artistic approaches to reveal the tensions that are the basis, not only of certain historical narratives disseminated by way of art throughout the urban fabric, but also of its multiple and unpredictable processes of distortion, reinterpretation, and erasure¹⁹.

¹⁶ Horvath and Rawski 2025, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ An overview of the term *Urbicide* can be found in Coward 2009, p 35. «In 1992 the issue of the widespread destruction of buildings in Bosnia was thematised by a group of architects from Mostar in a publication entitled *Mostar '92 – Urbicid* (Ribarevic-Nikolic, Juric 1992). The authors of *Mostar '92– Urbicid* presented the destruction of buildings in Mostar as a central aspect of the ongoing war. The term ‘urbicide’ has been invoked by a number of commentators in order to draw attention to the need for a consideration of destruction of the built environment as a form of violence in its own right. In the context of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1999, observers noted the manner in which the built environment was targeted in its own right. Writing about the destruction of the Croatian town of Vukovar by the Yugoslav National Army, Bogdan Bogdanovic introduced the notion that such destruction was urbicidal because it constituted the targeting of the urban by ‘city haters’ (Bogdanovic 1993; Bogdanovic 1994, pp. 37-74)».

¹⁹ Hubjer’s words from his official website, <https://makhubjer.art/>, 27.03.2025.

In *NŠŠ1*, a performance held in Sarajevo in 2017, Hubjer wraps up the *ICAR Canned Beef Monument*. The installation made by Nebojša Šerić Šoba in 2007 represents a large scale can of beef in painted steel, put on a marble plinth with the inscription *Monument to the International Community by the grateful citizens of Sarajevo*. Such cans were thrown from airplanes by international organisations as food supply for the civilians during the Siege. However, they were barely edible, often already expired; some of them consisted of pork in a city that was half Muslim. In short, that was not the support a besieged population would have expected from the international community, in fact accused of watching the events and doing nothing. Due to its ambivalent meaning, since 2007 the monument – evidently conceived as a counter-monument – has become graffitied, vandalised and then abandoned. In 2017 Hubjer wraps up the can as it should be moved for restoration and, wearing a white painter's suit, starts to brush and wash the plinth for an entire day. He acts intentionally without permission, as a citizen like any other who all at once decides to give care to public goods. The artist captures with video all the process with a particular attention to his gestures. As a follow up, he produces related works in different media, as a long-lasting echo of his performance. To cite the curator Alessandro Gallicchio:

After having washed and packaged the sculpture in the public space, the artist initiates a slow and inexorable procedure of transcription and re-materialisation of his performative interventions, which bear witness to the changeable nature of monumental transformations. Site-specific interventions and work in the studio can be read as complementary practices intended to tear down the boundaries between performance and pictorial gesture. By supporting the desacralisation of the monument, Mak Hubjer creates a constellation of objects that revolve around the residues of Bosnian memorials without subjecting them to the manipulation of memory²⁰.

Hubjer's practice is one of a conceptual kind. The act of packaging distantly recalls Christo installations and their capacity of giving iconic buildings a new visibility by the act of hiding them. Yet, by wrapping monuments that are controversial and far from being iconic, and by cleaning them, Hubjer intentionally creates a suspension of their semantic meaning, thus determining a sort of blank – clean – space for a dialogue that renegotiate the significance not necessarily in a binary way.

NŠŠ1 is just one piece of Hubjer's work. His research on the delicate relationship between public space, memory and history is ongoing and involves ever more urban objects in different cities of the Balkans under the name of *Clear Conscience*. Invited to 7th Kuma Summer School, he took attendees around in the city center of Sarajevo showing other anti-ideological and an-

²⁰ Gallicchio 2024, np.

ti-monumental artworks he wrapped up or cleaned, such as Daniel Buren flags for Ars Aevi project (*Polje zastava*, 1996) and Braco Dimitrijević *Under This Stone There is a Monument to the Victims of War and Cold War* (2006)²¹. Hubjer addresses traditional monuments and also anti/counter monuments, highlighting the inadequacy of both towards the need of cultivating memories that are not exclusive and harmful.

3.2. *Smirna Kulenović*, Our family garden, 2021

Smirna Kulenović is a young Bosnian artist (1994), born and raised in Sarajevo as well. At the center of her work there is the concept of the wounded being – both human and non-human – who needs to heal, individually and collectively. To be more precise, her research object is landscape. She observes that during the 1990s war – and during past wars – the natural landscape suffered as well and with it the entire ecosystem of human beings, plants, and animals. This suffering is witnessed by more or less visible scars layered at variable depth, which should be recognised and seen in order to be healed. Memory wipes are a typical reaction to trauma. Moreover, the adoption of divergent histories by the three ethnic groups often resulted in the removal and erasure of memory²². By re-activating a connection with such a landscape, Kulenović aims at giving back the right of remembrance to communities who have been deprived of. Interviewed by Deim Réka, the artist refers about the topic in relation to how Bosnian parents convey the memory of war to their children.

When the parents themselves are not able to face the war, they try to forget, block memories and they don't want to bother their kids with it. This creates a generation of kids who are completely unable to understand what happened so they are easily brainwashed. At school, they learn about different horrible histories and they don't know what to believe so they are more easily manipulated by politics. [...] Some parents don't want to face this themselves and create a lot of confusion in kids²³.

Evidently, Kulenović intends her work as a vehicle to counteract this manipulation by setting up collective actions for working together through the trauma of war.

In August 2021 a hundred women from Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia (and other countries) – dressed in red as the blood spilled during the conflict – gathered on the hills around Sarajevo and planted 1000 medicinal calendula plants

²¹ Buren's installation is object of Hubjer's performance titled *mb ft. bd* (2015); Dimitrijević's sculpture of *mb ft. db* (2018).

²² Cavigioli, Caira 2021.

²³ Réka 2018.

inside the remnants of abandoned war trenches. The performance, titled *Our family garden*, resembles a collective ritual of healing. The plant of calendula is known for its antibacterial and antifungal properties thanks to which it can be used for treating wounds. Wartime trenches left long lasting injuries into Bosnian landscape. In the specific case of Zlatište, i.e. the area chosen for the performance, the trenches actually mark the border between Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska; a place that is a permanent reminder of division. Opposite to the heaviness of such a remembrance, the artist adopts a light hand approach, highly symbolic albeit very concrete. She doesn't aim at erasing the grooves dug in the ground; rather she transforms them by means of the cyclical orange coloured flowering of calendula plants. The project actually started a few times before, when Smirna found that Zlatište was not just the place where her family went for picnic when she was a child, but also where her grandfather went up to defend the city during WWII, as well as during the 1990s war. She felt the need to go back to Zlatište to plant seeds of wheat in the area together with her mother and grandmother. Witnessing the healing potential of this small gesture, the artist was inspired to open the ritual for a wider audience. Thus, she planned the 2nd part of *Our family garden*, shifting from a private action to a collective effort of taking care of injured soil and facing painful memories. The artist's intention would be to repeat the performance every year on 6 April, when the "Day of Sarajevo", marks the date that the city was liberated from Nazi occupation in 1945, planting other sort of medical species and involving men as well. Still, the political situation in BiH is not kin to this kind of initiative and she gave up on the reiteration. Meanwhile, she started to work on another connected project, *Our Family Garden: Micro*. She took samples of the soil and war related objects (like metal plates and remains of munition) found at Zlatište before the calendula seeds were planted, and several months afterwards. Together with microbiologist Anastasia Bragina, she is conducting analysis of the various life forms from within the found objects and the soil, in order to show how it has been transformed by the medical plant.

The healing happens on all the microscopic and macroscopic layers. Like it or not, our human violence-related remains are becoming homes for new colonies of life. There is no scale upon which healing doesn't happen, just by letting the nature do its thing, just by listening and tuning into it — instead of dominating, corrupting and disturbing. May there be empathy on all scales of life²⁴.

Our family garden and its "spin-off" become a lasting, constantly self-transforming, organic monument built upon the ruins of the conflict.

²⁴ Kulenović's words on her Instagram profile, 22 February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZuLDQBtWcQ/?img_index=1>, 29.03.2025.

Kulenović's research touches upon the critical issue of the monumentalisation of memories in BiH. The artist opts for an activist approach based on repairing the broken bond between communities and their territories. Instead of monuments she invents collective rituals of care that are respectful of the mutual relationship between private and public memory and that instill new life in the wounded environment.

3.3. *Aida Šehović, ŠTO TE NEMA project, 2006-ongoing*

Aida Šehović, born in Banja Luka (1977), was forced to flee at the beginning of the war in 1992 and lived as a refugee in Turkey and Germany before establishing in the USA in 1997. In 2021 she returned to BiH and is now based in Sarajevo. Even only for reasons of age, her personal story and relation with her country of birth is much different than the other two. However, the obsession with memory pervades her work as well. Actually, one of her main concern is forgetfulness. Her *diaspora* condition could have largely contributed to the fear of losing pieces of history that, in the wrong hands, might be changed, misinterpreted and with the passing of time, fall into oblivion. «Perhaps I am afraid that I will forget. So, I repeat the gesture—over and over and over again. I repeat it so often that my body, especially my hands, learn to remember without me. How to carry and hold the cup»²⁵. The cup she refers to is a *fildžani*, a small traditional porcelain cup used for coffee in Bosnia. She continues:

It is small enough to fit perfectly in the palm of your hand. It has no handle, so your fingers wrap around it, growing used to the heat of the coffee over time. To survive, I started making proper Bosnian coffee—the way my mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts have taught me. The kaymak on top must be thick and creamy. There must be enough for each cup. You must not forget anyone. The cups are stronger than they look. Because they are made of porcelain, I always assumed they came from China. But I wonder—who made them? And for whom? How and why did they end up here? And when did we give them their own name—fildžani? Because they are without handles, they fit perfectly inside one another. When the monument is sleeping, they are stacked in boxes, forming rows of colorful patterns²⁶.

The mentioned monument is ŠTO TE NEMA²⁷ – i.e. where have you been, why aren't you here? – a title inspired by a traditional Bosnian song about

²⁵ These and the following are quoted from a text written by Šehović in consultancy with Adna Muslija in 2024, available at <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/aida-sehovic/?fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAaaq-q9cVHBZ7u2Iyto_qMjv59tKRZW1VDt8782w2oTY-gJ0axOqliicAdRI_aem_TJjgcv8wrkUJxLjVdZFIYw>, 30.03.2025.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Capital letters by the artist. See more at <<https://stotenema.com/>>, 30.03.2025.

withdrawal. Defining it as a monument is intentionally thought-provoking, since ŠTO TE NEMA is as far away as the word monument can suggest. Its building materials are *fildžani*, Bosnian coffee, and the public. Its site is the world itself; it is nomadic, since it traveled in 15 cities from 2006 to 2020. For its construction the artist began collecting *fildžani* in 2006 with the aim of having one cup for each of the 8372 victims of the Srebrenica Genocide, one of the most controversial episodes of the Bosnian war.

Just a few lines of history: after the outburst of the war, the enclave of Srebrenica was declared “Safe Area” for Bosniak Muslims under the protection of United Nations (UN). Almost at the end of the war, the UN Dutch batallion failed to deter the massacre of more than 8000 men perpetrated with genocidal intent by the units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska under Ratko Mladić. Still, the official recognition of what happened in July 1995 in Srebrenica as a genocide – i.e. a crime under international law – is actually a recent achievement²⁸, come after almost 30 years of attempts to justify the crime with revenge arguments, or even to deny it, by the side of Bosnian Serbs, and of embarrassment on the part of UN for having allowed such a horror under their eyes.

Šehović continues:

Each year from 2006 to 2020, the monument traveled. But it was alive only for one day each year— always on July 11.

This is the date on which we remember those killed in the Srebrenica Genocide—the first in Europe after World War II. After we had collectively said, never again.

There are more than 8372 cups that are part of the monument. Each one collected for a person we lost, miss, mourn, and remember. Each buried only after at least one fragment of their body was found and identified. Perhaps an arm. A leg. A finger.

So the genocide continues. Not the physical act of violence, but the endless waiting to find your loved one. The pain remains and is here to stay. It is transferred to generations born afterward— generations who do not remember any of this. They do not remember being persecuted, hated, displaced, or erased—all because of their names. Their Bosnian Muslim names.

I cannot remember alone. So I create spaces where we remember together. This struggle to fully remember, to try to recover what was lost, is at the core of my practice. Perhaps, if we remember together, we will remember better²⁹.

For fourteen years, Šehović organised the monument in the public square of a new city in partnership with local communities and the Bosnian *diaspora*. She started alone in 2006 doing a performance in Bašćaršija, the old town

²⁸ Only in May 2024, the UN designated July 11 as the annual *International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica*.

²⁹ Citation from the already mentioned text in <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/aida-sehovic/?fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAaaq-q9cVHBZ7u2Iyto_qMjv59tKRZW1V-Dt8782w2oTYgJ0axOqliicAdRI_aem_TJjegv8wtkJxLjVdZFIYw> , 30.03.2025.

of Sarajevo. That day she brought the first 923 cups collected with the help of The Women of Srebrenica Association and prepared coffee to fill them up while people passed by. From then on, year after year since 2020, the number of cups increased, people spontaneously got in contact with the artist to donate their *fildžani*, maybe after having found their loved ones. Thus, ŠTO TE NEMA slowly rose as a participatory, nomadic monument, with just one day a year of public life but a silent uninterrupted growth cared of by a community that in the meantime was forming.

The artist is no longer alone in sparking life into the monument. A team of volunteers and also passersby participate by placing the collected cups on the ground and filling them with Bosnian coffee, made on site throughout the day. The filled cups remain undrunk in memory of all those who never came back home to drink their coffee after 11th July 1995.

The choice of coffee as an artistic means is crucial for Šehović. Coffee in Bosnia is a deeply rooted culture. She says coffee «characterizes Bosnian culture more than anything else, and it's specifically the way we drink coffee because it's almost always shared»³⁰. Bosnians prepare coffee in traditional pots that they bring to the table together with the *fildžani*. The pot keeps the beverage hot for a long time, so that you can sit and have a conversation while sharing this daily ritual. In ŠTO TE NEMA coffee – and *fildžani* – become a symbol of care for memory, a commemoration that is shared, participatory and bottom up by its very nature. Anyone who passes by during the installation is witness of the magnitude of the Srebrenica Genocide, without the need of engraved words on memorial plaques.

At the end of the day, volunteers help each other at washing cups and place them in their boxes. Together, they close the ritual, making sure that no one cup is forgotten or neglected. Šehović trusts the power of doing together, of community caretaking and shared rituals. She questions the concept of monument as a permanent artifact, in a single place, transmitting a static memory. She makes a nomadic monument, open to community participation.

As a public art project ŠTO TE NEMA culminated in 2020 with more than 8,372 collected cups assembled at the site of the atrocities in Srebrenica-Potočari. After that ŠTO TE NEMA stopped traveling and in 2021 evolved into a non-profit organization dedicated to challenging the normalization of mass atrocities by creating spaces for healing, mourning, and resistance through art, education, and activism.

Directly descending from ŠTO TE NEMA, *Cups of memory* is now open at KM21 The Hague³¹. The project by architect Arna Mačkić and Aida Še-

³⁰ Words from the artist talk at 7th Kuma International Summer School on 23 July 2024.

³¹ Arna Mačkić & Aida Šehović, *Cups of Memory*. Building monuments through rituals, KM21 The Hague 12 July - 16 November 2025. More info at <<https://www.kunstmuseum.nl/en/press/arna-mackic-aida-sehovic-cups-memory>>, 21.08.2025.

hović, opened exactly 30 years after the Srebrenica Genocide, marks a further milestone in Šehović reflection about remembrance of traumatic events from the past. With *Cups of memory* Mačkić and Šehović asks: how do we commemorate as a society? How does a community build a monument for an act of genocide that some would prefer to have wiped from our memories? The answer is stated already in the subtitle of the initiative, which sounds like a mission: *Building monuments through rituals*. Instead of refusing the existence of monuments the artist finds a different pathway to build them, focused on collective processes and even rituals.

4. Conclusion

Hubjer, Kulenović and Šehović are examples, among many possible others, of the attitude that Bosnian artists have towards the issue of monuments and remembrance. All of them feel the urgent need to question the official politics of memory and monumentalisation in present BiH. In a divided country, always at risk of new conflicts, history is a powerful instrument in the hands of governments. Memories blur the more distant war events get and artists feel charged of the responsibility to keep them alive as long as Bosnian people will be able to cope with their trauma, preventing them from revisionism. It's worth noting that the three mentioned artists are not against monuments in principle. Rather they call for a new conception of the monument itself, one that is no longer inextricably tied with the rhetoric of nationalism and the formation of ethnic identity via exclusion. They stand for an update of the concept of monument to a more contemporary paradigm, one that embeds multiethnicity, cosmopolitanism, inclusion and respect for diversity. Against the risk of forgetfulness, they stress the nature of remembering as a process, even better if shared and participated.

As Dan Hicks stresses:

Monumentality, and the diverse practices of genealogy and commemorating the ancestral past that can accompany it, can take many different forms, which are as diverse as their potential meanings. There are public buildings, temples, pyramids and statues, and there are earthen barrows, shell mounds and stone tombs. [...] Sometimes even natural places like mountains, caves, rivers or springs can be a kind of monument - because of the human practices or rituals activities that take place there. [...] It's the process that is key³².

Hubjer, Kulenović and Šehović are entirely aware that the construction of monuments sometimes operates against remembering, since memory entails a

³² Hicks 2025, p. 29.

continued effort which on the contrary a static object of commemoration fixes in time and place. As Bordeleau notes «the memorial can become a surrogate for remembering, rather than a motor or frame for the continued engagement with the past to be remembered»³³. Moreover, in the case of the Srebrenica Genocide there's a considerable danger that the site of those bloody events becomes object of so called "dark tourism"³⁴, thus transforming whatever monument in a negative heritage.

In such a context, the artists' interventions have both a symbolic and actual value. The practices presented here can be labelled as socially engaged art, art activism or participatory art; indeed, all of them are based on the belief that artists can have a crucial role in exploring strategies for confronting contested history and difficult heritage, indicating a possible way to heal a divided post-conflict society. As Macdonald poses «the input of artists can be extremely helpful here [in cases of contentious heritage] as they are often accustomed to working with complexity and ambiguity, as well as skilled in forms of public engagement that are not so much based in mechanical ideas of knowledge»³⁵. Be it packaging/cleaning, planting seeds, or making coffee, the artistic interventions shown take the form of secular rituals rooted in a practice of care. Here, art activism is intended as a necessary approach to give «communities of implication»³⁶ (and beyond) an agency on the ways they preserve, nurture and keep alive their own memory.

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³³ Ivi, p. 19.

³⁴ Lennon, Malcolm 2000.

³⁵ Macdonald 2021, p. 115.

³⁶ Lehrer 2021. The author argues that the definition of heritage community by the Council of Europe (CoE), i.e. «people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations» (2005) is focused on choice and desire yet overlooking the multifold ways in which communities are implicated in – affected by – tangible and intangible cultural products in ethical terms. Though she proposes the expression community of implication, posing that objects and the material world has the ability to move, to connect, to remind even to accuse.

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