

**Braco Dimitrijević: *Under This Stone There is a Monument
to the Victims of War and Cold War***

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The artist Braco Dimitrijević conceptualized his piece “Under this stone there is a monument to the victims of war and Cold War” as a large stone block, dimensions 150x150x300 cm, engraved with the above stated text in four languages. It was erected as the winning art piece of the *New Monument* competition, initiated within the larger project known as *De/construction of Monuments*,¹ with the goal of “critical examination and analysis of both past and current “distortions of consciousness”, their public manifestations and consequences” and discovering “new ideas, artistic proposals and solutions that are free of any dogmatic ideas and not (ab)used by structures of power or “new” ideologies” (Blažević, 2006: 10) (my translation). Considering that location the work is exhibited at has a particular symbolic meaning (it was elevated next to the building of the former Museum of the Revolution, that was established in 1945 and converted into the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993) a starting point of this paper would be an analysis of the art work with regard to the socialist realist systems of visual representation and the mythologies they embody.

The art of socialist realism, executed primarily in the form of monumental sculpture, was the visual manifestation of one particular myth: the myth of the Yugoslav People's Liberation War (NOB). This myth itself was created by combining the mythologized Anti-Fascist struggle and the struggle against class enemy.² According to Roland Barthes “myth is a form of speech” (Bart, 1971: 263) or, in other words, myth is a socially and historically founded carrier of messages. Myth does not have its origin in “nature”³ ; it can rather be described as “an idea in form” (Ibid., 266) (my translation). In this context the notion of

¹ This multi-disciplinary project that started in 2004, was created with the objective of “demystification and demythologization of the past, deconstruction of transitional realities in post-socialist, particularly post-Yugoslav countries” (Blažević, 2006: 6).

² Socialist realism, the official art of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), was the official art program of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) within its strategy of preserving the legacy of the Yugoslav People's Liberation War (NOB). The official KPJ politic was based on the NOB narratives (Merenik, 2009: 128).

³ Myth consumer does not perceive relationships between *form*, *idea* and *meaning* as constructed but rather natural and factual. Myth does not function as something that needs to be interpreted and demystified, but accepted as natural order of things instead. Myth hides nothing – its function is to distort, not to renounce. Myth allows socially and historically established appearances to transform and become natural.

speech or *language* implies verbal or visual elements or their synthesis as carriers of meanings. Therefore, the systems of visual representation – as carriers of strict, predetermined meanings – embodied and transmitted the mythological speech about NOB (conceptualized as a revolution and uprising) that was the theoretical foundation of the newly constructed social system and the new social consciousness. In socialist realist sculptures this myth was materialized and represented through the depiction of a strong, vital body – the symbol of workers/ rebels/ revolutionaries. In other words, the NOB was simultaneously symbolically depicted through a body of soldier/ partisan who has risen against the foreign aggression and that itself embodies the Communist Revolution and through a body of worker/ manufacturer who creates new, different future. Consequently, the war was transformed into a piece time battle for the creation of fresh values and thus it determined the methods of organization of the new society and the new future. Accordingly, even abstract monumental sculptures that “clearly do not contain any figuration” represent “a collective body depicted as an abstract form” causing “a body’s presence to be indirectly sensed in them” (Musabegović, 2009, 41) (my translation).

Braco Dimitrijević’s work, located in front of the former Museum of the Revolution, symbolically refers to monumental sculptures executed in the SFRJ. Its form denies dogmatic, canonized, ideologically conditioned visual representation systems of the socialist realism, therefore, opposing the prescribed visual manifestations of the mythologized NOB and notions of victims/ heroes – founders of new, different and better future. Simultaneously, it questions the ideologically established “use value” of the NOB and its legacies.⁴ By placing the “monument” beneath the large stone, before the former Museum of the Revolution, the author demythologizes the NOB, renouncing its fixed, predetermined meanings. The recollection of Barthes’ definition of myth as “an idea in form”, could suggest that this artwork is an idea deconstructed through form.

The engraved words “Under this stone there is a monument to the victims of war and Cold War” renounce the function of the artwork itself, disputing its existence. It is inevitable to question the nature of this monument. Where is it located? Is the purpose of the engraved stone to point, like a sign, to the “presence” of the “real” monument or is the carved stone the monument itself? Does the monument exist at all? The author did not identify the war whose victims are commemorated with this art piece. Through its transformation into the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Museum of the Revolution lost its purpose of

⁴ “...war mythology needs to create a foundation of collective perception of the world, according to which new events would be structured and determined” (Musabegović, 2009: 49) (my translation).

preserving and cherishing legacies of the mythologized NOB (through artifacts exhibitions) and obtained a new one. The new Historical Museum presents the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Middle Ages to present day, and therefore can “supply” this “monument” with any (or all) past war.⁵ This “loan” however, can only be a historical fact without any ideological baggage. Through the construction of the “nonexistent” and therefore, ideology free monument, and commemorating not only the victims of war but the Cold War also, the author questions roles and consequences of ruling, socially and historically specific ideological structures and their public manifestations. Hence this “monument” is not a visual manifestation of a specific ideology, rather a window for inquiry and contemplation.

Meanings of this artwork cannot be fixed and determined; they are multiple, decentralized, exchangeable. The author suggests a possibility that original, single meaning does not exist; he exchanges “ideological truths and values” for numerous potential, uncertain and fluid aspects of truth and knowledge. Therefore, *De/construction* of this “monument” implies a creative “activity of reading” or, in other words, a “destruction of fixed meanings during continuous and never completed processes of signification” (Đorđević, 2009: 106) (my translation).

⁵ Does the author refer to the “newest” war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992 – 1995)?

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