

## A Monumental Predicament: The *Statue Park* in Budapest, Hungary

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Budapest is a city of monuments. Statues, plaques, effigies, and busts appear at every turn as the material accumulations of long and disputed histories both official and not. The city is a repository for names, dates, events, battles, revolutions won and lost, and sites of veneration. It has been transformed by the legacies of historians and leaders who have (re)constructed the monumental history of Budapest in the semblance of their own ideologies. Through thousands of years of its contested history, sections of the city have worn thin from frictions and tumults while others remain thick and callused with the monumental deposits that have accumulated over time.

Every city has its monuments and historical markings, indeed; however, the recent past in Budapest has witnessed such a continuous occurrence of social and political turnovers, that the materialization of its monumental history has been caught in a perpetual state of crisis. Consider only the second half of the twentieth century. Following the Soviet "liberation" and subsequent occupation of the city at the end of the Second World War, street names changed, histories were rewritten and monuments were simultaneously removed and replaced, all towards the *strategic* goal of maintaining a constant, physical and mental presence in the lives of those living under a foreign power. And in the time between 1985 and 1998, there were at least 166 new statues and monuments erected as well as numerous accounts of "illegal sculptures" erected outside of any official administrative regulations, while 58 others were either destroyed or removed. Moreover, there have been countless namings

and renamings of streets, squares, buildings, and parks in the years following what Hungarians refer to as "The Change" after the Soviet withdrawal from the city. In fact, one Budapest atlas lists upwards of 400 new street names in the capital city alone since 1989. One could argue that monuments and monumentality in Budapest have been under assault and in transition longer than in any lasting and enduring posture implied by the very definition of a monument. In short, Budapest has placed monumentality itself in a notable predicament.

Following the end of the Soviet occupation in 1990, the political, cultural, and social problems facing the Hungarian government were further complicated by two contradictory urges: to remove the physical traces of their recent history, while preserving the memory of this past as a reminder and warning for generations to follow. Consequently, in the aftermath of a decades-long chain of events, the Hungarian government faced the "issue of what to do with all the statues dating from the previous political system," and "on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1991, the Budapest Assembly came to a decision concerning the future fate of the statues in question." After much public debate, "The Culture Committee of the Assembly invited a tender for 'what is to be done with the statues', which in effect was a tender for the design of the future Statue Park."<sup>1</sup> As a result, the *Statue Park: Gigantic Memorials from the Communist Dictatorship* stands as one of the most significant artifacts of recent past revealing a particular culture's stated position relative to the uses of history for life. (Fig.1)



Fig. 1. Statue Park

While admirably preserving 'politically undesirable' monuments in an attempt to 'never forget', the new Statue Park must also be understood in regards to of internal incongruities within the more general project of monumentality itself. As previously noted, preserving an enduring value and signification is fundamental to the mission of a monument, and yet the very consumption and use of monuments over time transforms them both definitively and critically. Therefore, in removing a monument from its context one inevitably removes with it any re-readings and misappropriations of meaning that may have accumulated within the reality of its public life. This is made evident in the case of Budapest by the fact that long before any of the official changeovers in the political structures of 1989-90, much of the statuary erected under Soviet occupation had already undergone transformations of their official symbolism for interpretations deemed more useful and appropriate to the practices of everyday life.

### History for Life

In his 'meditation' on history, Friedrich Nietzsche both criticizes and declares the cultural necessity of history for the "sake of life and action." He writes, "We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate."<sup>2</sup> While Nietzsche was directly addressing the scientific "excesses of the historical sense" of his time, the challenges facing historians today emerge more from the shifting and unstable ground upon which history is written and rewritten.

Nietzsche's essay continues by detailing the threefold relationship between history and the living, thriving being. "History pertains to the

living man in three respects," writes Nietzsche, each within its respective historical species: "it pertains as a being who acts and strives" (as in the *monumental species*), "as a being who preserves and reveres" (as in the *antiquarian species*), and "as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance (manifesting in the *critical species*)."<sup>3</sup>

"Of what use, then, is the monumentalistic conception of the past, to the man of the present?" Nietzsche asks, "He learns from it that the greatness that once existed was in any event once possible and may thus be possible again; he goes his way with more cheerful step, for the doubt which assailed him in weaker moments...has now been banished." In this sense, it is the mere fact of 'once having been' that the monumental historian draws upon for its power and agency. However, if this mode of assessing and writing history prevails out of balance, "it will always have to deal in approximation and generalities, in making what is dissimilar look similar," and therefore "the past itself suffers harm: whole segments of it are forgotten, despised and flow away in an uninterrupted colourless flood, and only individual embellished facts rise out if it like islands."<sup>4</sup>

If the *monumental species* of history is one that strives and acts towards exaltation of the all-powerful at the expense of reducing and universalizing the past, the *antiquarian species* rather "wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the abstract concept of the monumental is given a much more literal reverence and is fixed in the backwards glance of the antiquarian. In a pronouncement of virility and permanence of being, the antiquarian proclaims proudly, "Here we lived. . . for here we are living; and here we shall live, for we are tough and not to be ruined over night. Thus with the aid of this 'we' he looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city."<sup>6</sup>

Nietzsche tempers the dialectic between the *monumental* and *antiquarian species* by interjecting the notion a third mode, the *critical*: "and this too in the service of life." For "if he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he

does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it." To be critical, then, is to acknowledge the "extent to which to live and to be unjust is one and the same." Just as one requires the ability to forget and live *unhistorically*, one must also acquire the capacity to live unjustly, and to critically condemn the past while venerating and preserving it.

Of course this requires a level of self-reflective criticism in the process. This *critical* species must always retain an internal balance and awareness of the power that underlies their condemnations: "and men and ages which serve life by judging and destroying a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages. For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes."<sup>7</sup> The *critical* historian must work cautiously yet confidently, advancing the life of the present while always remaining cognizant and self-aware enough to turn one's own critical scope back upon themselves and judge, not only their past, but also the present in which they now operate.

It is through the dynamic triumvirate from Nietzsche's meditation that this essay will contextualize and problematize the *Statue Park* and monumentality itself.

### Is there a there there?

(In an attempt to contextualize and problematize the *Statue Park* I have included several excerpts from articles written about the *Statue Park* from English-language publications and excerpts from an interview conducted during my stay in Budapest.) (emphases are the authors)

*"a group of 58 'politically undesirable' statues are being hauled away to a 20 acre memorial park taking shape on a **vacant lot** in an outlying district of the capital."<sup>8</sup>*

*"Today the relics of Hungary's Socialist experience have been laid rest in **an inauspicious plot** on the edge of a new **suburban subdivision** just outside of Budapest."<sup>9</sup>*

*"Hungary's recent past has been **exiled to a former landfill** next to a Shell station on the outskirts of Buda."<sup>10</sup>*

*"They were all removed, every last one of them, but the best were relocated to a **vacant lot** that the city had wanted to use for a **toxic waste dump**. Instead, the lot became an open-air museum."<sup>11</sup>*



Fig. 2. View of *Statue Park* from road

In a meeting with Ágnes Szöllösy at the Statues and Monuments Archive in the Budapest Gallery on June 22, 1999, I questioned Ms. Szöllösy about the siting of the *Statue Park* and the decisions that led up to such a choice of site. An excerpt of that interview follows:

**Q:** How was that particular site chosen?

**A:** The site was offered by District XXII. This site was deemed a *bad land* by the district in that it was bad soil for cultivation and had no other viable uses. It was being offered for free by the district. Essentially, the location of the site was chosen for its *availability*.

**Q:** Was there consideration for the *Statue Park's* great distance from the center of the city?

**A:** There were great debates among the political parties deciding the fate of the statuary, with the different positions often falling along political lines, as well as a great public debate as to whether or not the statues were worthy for preservation and the potential danger of interpreting the park as a veneration of the ideologies that once supported them. With such highly debated considerations, it would have been an impossibility at the time to have sited such statues anywhere in the center of the city, not to mention the fact that there was not the available amount of land needed to house all 41 statues and their landscaped grounds.

Ms. Szöllösy's remarks, and the quotes above, give a sense of the distancing, both physical and theoretical, that resulted from the Statue Park's placement at the selected site on the outskirts of Budapest's district XXII. (Fig. 2) However, beyond the spatial distances created by the isolated location of the Park, the associative consequences of this separation remains of great interest in the assessment of the park as a significant or useful cultural artifact to the practices of everyday life. Far from the public squares, streets, and parks which once housed the monuments, the Statue Park exists more as an archive that operates outside and at distance from the encounters and exchanges of a collective experience. The visitors to the Statue Park are no longer afforded the opportunity to confront their past as a material reality with direct consequence to their present and future circumstances. Instead, the Statue Park is held at a distance from the lived and living spaces of the city rendering it ineffectual as a site for any lasting cultural critique.

Furthermore, the decision to locate the Statue Park at such great distance from the city center carries indirect implications on the legibility of Budapest itself as a repository for a collective memory. The systematic removal of statues—in denying the city a past that is undeniably significant to Hungary's history and present—manifests itself in an illusory representation of a Budapest cleared of its monumental, Soviet past—as if it physically never existed. It is true that the Statue Park attempts to preserve an echo of Budapest's past under Soviet occupation, yet it does so outside of the context of that past. And herein lies the internal predicament in regards to the usefulness of the Statue Park to the practices and occurrences of daily life today. The preservationist desires that drove the entire project behind the Statue Park has omitted, from the city of Budapest, the very real and significant, albeit difficult, traces of its shared historical experiences.

**where's Lenin?** (In the interest of space I will here detail the story of only one of the 41 statues in the Statue Park)

In 1958, the Soviet Party Secretary Nikita Krushchov visited the Csepel iron and metal works complex to acquaint himself more intimately with the Hungarian achievements



Fig. 3. Lenin at Statue Park

towards socialism. During his visit to the main gates of the complex he highlighted the absence of a suitable monument to honor and motivate the factory workers. As a result, only months later, on the 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the 'Great October Socialist Revolution (November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1958) the Council of Moscow gave the Hungarian capital a 'present', its first Lenin statue erected in a public space.<sup>12</sup> However, as the statue aged, the effigy became the object of political scrutiny and *tactics* against its monumental posture.

In need of repairs a decade after its erection, a covert operation of Csepel technicians swiped the statue and replaced it with a replica so as to perform the necessary cosmetic detailing on the effigy. During the 1980s both statues (Lenin and double) became the focus of more political attacks, leaving the effigies vulnerable to alterations of their intended significations. Make-shift signs and draperies transformed the communist leader into a billboard and scaffolding for signage. With severe juxtapositions of props and gags, the charismatic and dynamic posture of Lenin was diminished to a caricature of himself. In one such case, during a major price hike by the State, which led to drastic burdens on one's abilities to purchase even the base necessities, someone placed a piece of bread in the extended hand of the leader accelerating the *enunciations* of his paternal benevolence to a level of irony, considering the existing circumstances.

With the political changes in 1989-90 came a flourishing of political gestures performed on the socialist statuary throughout the city. Therefore, when the workers at the Csepel factory caught word of a planned coup against the Lenin statue, they removed the leader and secured his safety in one of the factory's storage rooms. However, despite his disappearance, or perhaps because of it, the statue's former base remained as a contested site for political tactics. One such strike left the stump decorated with signs declaring that the "SZDSZ Party (The social-democratic Alliance of Free Democrats) has sent me home." In exile beneath one of the factories, the 'Father of Communism' stood silently amidst boxes, crates and broken machinery, energetically extending his arm out to an audience no longer interested, while above, in the spaces of everyday life, tacticians created a political presence out of his conspicuously empty pedestal.

Ironically enough, the Lenin statue is now more fixed in its signification than ever. In 1996, the Csepel Iron Works factory and the Csepel Public Service Company, presented Lenin as a gift to the Statue Park Museum. (Fig. 3) Left unable to undergo any tactical modifications (*critical historian*), the statue stands transfixed in its earlier and singular meaning. The single-sided monumentality ensconced in the Statue Park's program (*antiquarian and monumental historian*) has restored Lenin to the level of icon that was so instrumental in disseminating his propagandized 'cult of personality'.

**Sites of Memory** (again, in the interest of space I will detail only one former site to illustrate the above discussions)

Although the Statue Park remains distanced from any critical encounter with everyday life, several of the former sites from which the Soviet-backed monuments have been removed still offer a shared space for the present to confront the difficulties of Budapest's contested past. Moving throughout the city one is struck by the degree to which most of the former sites have been either polished over or completely erased as a public declaration of forgetfulness. (Fig. 4) However, in several rare and exceptional cases it remains possible to observe and experience the resonance of a past juxtaposed with an active present and

the potentials that these sites hold for a vital and dynamic future.

### **statue #33: Monument to The Republic of Councils**

This monument commemorated the efforts of the Communist Republic of Councils, the communist regime which briefly led the nation in 1919 under the leadership of Béla Kun. At its inception, an army was needed to ensure the defense of the Republic of Councils and the authorities called on the top artists of the day to design recruitment and propaganda posters. One such poster by Róbert Berényi was the inspiration for the 9.5 meter (31'-2") bronze statue designed by István Kiss that was erected on Felvonulási Tér in 1969 as a counterbalance to the Lenin statue along the Party parade route. However, the aesthetic counterbalancing of the site was only part of the logic behind the selection for the monument's location. The Regnum Marianum Church, built in the 1920's following the end of the Republic of Councils, had once occupied the site on which the statue was later erected. In an act of defiance on the part of party officials, the church was destroyed in the 1950's during the construction of a military parade route used for rallies and mass celebrations by the Soviet-backed communist regime.

In somewhat typical fashion, the official removal of this statue, in 1992, became a ceremonial event not unlike the rallies and parades for which the statue once served as a backdrop. With several newspaper articles documenting the public display of the monument's dismantling, the statue was lifted into the air emptying it of its monumentality. Since the statue's removal, however, the spiraling stone base and concrete foundation of the monument has remained intact and the statue has been replaced by a make-shift wooden cross in commemoration of the destroyed Regnum Marianum Church. In addition, a sign of an equally provisional nature has been erected on a set of flagpoles behind the monument honoring the religious legacy of the site and calling attention to those who remain responsible for its destruction.

What remains most striking about the sites discussed above is the potential that they

carry to operate as what Pierre Nora refers to as *Sites of Memory*. Nora writes:

*"The acceleration of history, then, confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory—social and unviolated...and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past...Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer...Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past...Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects."*<sup>13</sup>

These sites, and others like them, contain accumulations of lived and living memories, pure, self-referential, concentrated, and yet open to a full expanse of possibilities. They allow for the practices of contemporary life to critically confront Budapest's difficult past without condemning it to the closed archives of the antiquarian. By allowing the past (no matter how difficult) a space in the present, these sites encourage a critical discourse without obliterating a history that is undeniably defining to the living memory of Budapest.

As witnessed in the grand finale concert of the *Bűcsú* festival, which is celebrated yearly to commemorate the departure of the last Soviet Soldiers in 1991, the base that once housed the Monument to The Republic of Councils was taken over by a large gathering of people there to participate in the evening's performances. (Fig. 5) The vital life of the present animated the physical remains of a difficult history, critically provoking it while granting it a place in the collective experiences that marches forward. If allowed



Fig. 4. Ruins of base for Statue #33 used during *Bűcsú* festival as public gathering space.

To remain open to manipulations and appropriations over time these spaces of collective memory can actively *perform* history as an unfolding narrative instead of simply re-presenting it as a closed and singular system.

Unlike the isolated occurrences that take place in the Statue Park, the disturbances and events that have and will take place on the abovementioned *sites of memory* compose a history of another nature, one that writes the story of a Budapest re-membered. These civic spaces confront the past as a material presence, preserving its incessant accumulation as a living composition, no longer indebted to the sanctity of a singular symbolic history. Scarred, amputated and disfigured as they are, these sites offer a place within the collective memory for further accumulations by which to re-member the histories of Budapest, promised and forgotten.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> quoted from [www.szoborpark.hu](http://www.szoborpark.hu)

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, pg. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, pg. 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, pg. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, pg. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, pg. 76.

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest Beck, "Creating Leninland", (*Art News*, 91: Nov '92), 53-4+.

<sup>9</sup> Aubrey Verboven, "Socialist Statues Laid to Rest In Park", (*Central Europe Online*, week of June 9-15)

<sup>10</sup> Igor Greenwald, "A Park of Statues Freezes Communist Heroes in Irony's Light", (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 20, 1998), B2.

<sup>11</sup> Miklós Vámos, "Cold War Tourism, Eastern Style. Banned in Budapest: Red Stars, Socialist Statuary", (*The Nation*, October 6, 1997), 35-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Statue Park Guide*, Publisher Ákos Réthly

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*" (*Representations* 26: Spring 1989), 7-25.