

Raino Isto, University of Maryland, USA

The Monument as Ruin: Natalivity, Spectrality, and the History of the Image in the Tirana Independence Monument

Abstract

This article examines the Tirana Independence Monument, first inaugurated in November of 2012 on the hundredth anniversary of Albanian independence from the Ottoman Empire. The monument, designed by Visar Obrija and Kai Roman Kiklas, swiftly fell into disrepair until it was recently renovated in November of 2015. The article analyzes the monument's function in terms of its doubled existence as a sign of perpetual natalivity (the possibility of the rebirth of national consciousness) and as a ruin with a spectral pseudo-presence (as an object that continually reminds us of the disjunctions that divorce the present from its historicity). It considers the way the monument's inauguration relates to the politics of monumentality in contemporary Albania, and argues that the monument's gradual ruination between 2012 and 2015 can be read as a particular manifestation of the history of the image in late capitalist society.^[1]

Keywords: spectrality, natalivity, monumentality, Albania, Tirana, independence, national identity, grid, public sculpture

1. Introduction

“A good city is a city that remembers.”—Erion Veliaj (qtd. in “Monumenti i Pavarësisë rikonstruktohet”)^[2]

“The fortification, once an object, tended to become a ‘subject.’”—Paul Virilio (41)

The image of the damaged, abandoned or ruined monument has served for some time as both an icon and an index of the postsocialist condition. As Sergiusz Michalski points out, the decay and dismantling of the monuments so ubiquitous throughout much of the former socialist sphere are frequently treated as paradigmatic of the status of society after the fall of Communism (148-49). More recently, the urban architectural ruin has taken on a kind of analogous set of meanings across the globe, as “images of urban abandonment ... produced by deindustrialization and disinvestment” become exemplary of the failures of capitalist development (Apel). In both cases, the process of ruination is often read as a sign of obsolescence, yet the reasons for this obsolescence (and its relationship to the enactment and imaging of history) are complex and vary widely.

This article considers a recent work of monumental sculpture that occupies an uneasy yet telling position between these two paradigms: the Tirana Independence Monument, inaugurated in 2012 along the Albanian capital city’s central boulevard. It examines the history of this work, which has passed through the phases of birth, degradation and rejuvenation all during a relatively short span of time within the postsocialist period. Furthermore, the article traces monumental practices in Tirana surrounding (both spatially and temporally) the Independence Monument’s installation, and offers a reading of the discourses that are currently attempting to shape the memory of both the Ottoman era and the socialist years in Albania.

Using the Independence Monument as a lens, the article explores the relationship between the ruin of the monument in the postsocialist era and the history of the image during late capitalism, emphasizing the narrative and aesthetic difficulties of representing collective national memory and identity in contemporary Eastern Europe. The article treats the monument’s ruin as a materialization of the process of memorialization (rather than simply as a side effect of the work’s perceived obsolescence), and specifically as the liminal materialization of the slippage between spectrality and natality that characterizes the effort to consolidate postsocialist discourses on national identity. The Tirana Independence Monument as a ruin represents the persistence of history in the face of attempts to establish an ahistorical model of national contemporaneity. Its evolving dissolution and restoration indicate the historical processes and transformations that the

image of remembrance undergoes at the confluence of the Ottoman and socialist pasts, and the transnational capitalist present.

2. Monumental Ruins

Let us begin with an image of ruins, ruins of a very particular kind. These are the ruins that come about swiftly, the kind of ruins that emerge whole-cloth within weeks, months, a few years. They testify neither to the passage of great expanses of time, nor to the depth of the past or its remoteness. If they manage to conjure the sensation of nostalgia (and even this is doubtful), it is a nostalgia much closer to Jameson's "nostalgia for the present" (279-96), the nostalgia Appadurai calls "nostalgia without memory" (30). In these ruins, we have the attempt to re-(re)present the collective history of an imagined community, to re-inscribe the image of the nation in a medium (the monumental) that asserts its longevity and fundamental futurity even as its decay signals the almost immediate necessity to re-inscribe the origin.

By the summer months of 2015, not even three years after its inauguration in November of 2012, the Independence Monument [Monumenti i Pavarësisë] in Albania's capital, Tirana, was already a ruin [Figures 1 and 2].



Figure 1. The Tirana Independence Monument, photographed in summer 2015. Photo by the author.

exposure to the elements, and within a few months the work had lost its initial sheen entirely (Ekphrasis Studio) [Figure 3].

By July of 2015, the monument's surface was almost entirely transformed into a dull, blackish-brown expanse.



Figure 3. The Tirana Independence Monument, photographed in summer 2013. Photo by the author.

This natural degradation was accompanied by the disappearance of large sections of the monument's surface: its metal panels had gradually been ripped away by citizens and – at least in some cases – sold as scrap (“Vidhen për skrap”). The removal of these panels left vast stretches of the sculpture's interior structure and spaces exposed; some panels hung loosely from the work, bent but not yet fully detached, like patches of metal skin pulled back from a wound. Graffiti marked the surface of the monument, testifying to the presence of “Roberti” and “Danieli,” of “Pidhropshi numër 1” and “Linda+Alban,” and of many others who had added their names to the monument's surfaces as if incising them on the tabula rasa of history. To write one's name on the

already decomposing monument must have been a complicated existential gesture: celebrating the duration, or rebirth, of the collective even as the material manifestation of that collective visibly lost its consistency. If the Independence Monument endured these unofficial inscriptions, these additions to history, alongside the trauma done to its body, the theft of its skin, it also endured more humiliating affronts to its existence. News reports lamented the fact that the monument was frequently used by citizens as a public toilet (“Skandal”), its walls offering perhaps just enough privacy to make its space attractive for those in need.

So then, it would seem, the Independence Monument represented a very significant kind of failure – whether because of its placement, or its aesthetics, or its message, or (most likely) some combination of these factors.



Figure 4. The scaffolding surrounding the Tirana Independence Monument, photographed in summer 2015. Photo by the author.

One would not have been surprised by its removal. And yet, by August of 2015, a scaffold was erected around the monument [Figure 4]. The gridded outer surface of the monument’s two sections was – oddly enough – aesthetically echoed by the network of steel poles criss-crossing through the space surrounding the sculpture, creating an exoskeleton as if to replace the exposed inner skeleton of the monument. However, this peculiar visual structural exteriorization of the

monument was also short-lived. A drapery was placed over the scaffolding, bearing a printed image of the monument as it had initially appeared: its faceted walls gleaming in the sunlight [Figure 5]. This second skin, bearing the logo of the Tirana municipality, remained in place for some months, a kind of hyperreal simulation of the monument. The monument – which had been a kind of quintessential abstraction of Albanian national history, its transmutation into pure geometric forms and opaque materials – ceased to be an abstraction at all.

This change occurred in a way eerily close to the logical-historical progression Baudrillard describes in his discussion of simulations.



Figure 5. The drapery covering the scaffold of the Tirana Independence Monument, photographed in summer 2015. Photo by the author.

The Independence Monument (and I shall offer a more thorough description of its genesis below) passed through the stages of the image almost precisely as Baudrillard outlines (6). It first served “as the reflection of a profound reality” (since it was inaugurated to commemorate the anniversary of the Albanian nation’s independence in 1912). Almost immediately, it “mask[ed] and denature[d] a profound reality” (since, in projecting this unity and implying the availability of a return to such a unity, it was almost by definition denaturalizing in effect). Eventually, through its assisted process of degradation, it came to obscure “the absence of a profound reality” (since its continued

existence was in opposition to the absence of the contemporary national-historical consciousness that its ruin asserted). Finally, covered by a scaffolding and a skin made in its own image, the Independence Monument became “its own pure simulacrum” – it suggested no fundamental deep structures of memory, and it referenced neither the presence nor the absence of a shared national consciousness.

But of course, like so many things, the Independence Monument did not languish in the rather nihilistic concluding phase of Baudrillard’s history of the image: it was reborn. In November of 2015, the reconstructed monument was unveiled – its structure once again whole and its surfaces once again bright and shining. When the doubling veil was pulled down from the monument, Tirana’s current mayor, Erion Veliaj – the political protégé of Prime Minister and artist Edi Rama – declared, “A good city is a city that remembers” (qtd. in “Monumenti i Pavarësisë rikonstruktiohet”). Veliaj’s appeal to Tirana’s citizens – to treat the monument as a sacred (and expensive) materialization of the Albanian people’s memory and national pride – effectively ignored the significance of the process that the Independence Monument had undergone over the course of the previous three years, its transformation from monument to ruin to simulated image and back into monument. The purpose of this essay is to recover some of the significance of that cyclical transformation, and to assert that the relationship of slippage between natality, spectrality and rebirth was in fact already coded into the monument by the events surrounding its inauguration. This unstable relationship produced the simultaneous representation and actual materialization of a liminal state of being, figuring the nation as an entity constantly reborn – but reborn as the spectral return of its own pasts.

Put briefly, I argue that the Independence Monument represents the attempt to perpetuate (to monumentalize) a moment of origin as a moment of transition, and to assert the coincidence of this moment with the present. The sensation of time that it aims to engender in viewers is simultaneously that of natality – in the sense that Hannah Arendt (177-78) described the natality inherent in political action – and that of spectrality – in the sense that Derrida (125) names spectrality as that which exceeds form and being in its persistent return. The monument’s ruination and rebirth are emblematic of a set of difficulties related to the imaging of the relationship between Albania’s past and its present, and in particular of effectively representing the historicity of

Albania's current sociopolitical condition, dominated by neoliberalism. The renewal of the Independence Monument in November of 2015 attempted to collapse history – even the brief three-year history of the monument itself – into a condition of absolute coincidence or contemporaneity. This collapse of time in fact works against the memory that Veliaj claimed the monument's restoration would promote. However, if we approach the monument critically, we can understand the ways its claims to (ahistorical, originary) self-presence can only appear compelling because of a corollary and destabilizing haunting that exposes the myth of national unity in both the past and the present.

3. Independence Redoubled

November of 2012 saw the celebration of the hundredth year of Albanian independence from the Ottoman Empire, a celebration marked by the inauguration of two new monuments along the southern arm of the Boulevard of the Martyrs of the Nation, Tirana's axial boulevard. One of these monuments was the new Independence Monument, jointly designed by two architects from Kosovo and Germany, respectively – Visar Obrija and Kai Roman Kiklas. In the competition for the monument's design, there were five finalists. Sculptor Thoma Thomai Dhamo proposed a massive bronze unfurling flag form, Jörg Plickat a pair of broken chain links, Blerta Xhomo dhe Ilirjan Shima a stylized double-headed eagle (the symbol found on Albania's flag and associated with the nation) and Pjerin Kolnikaj a tall, narrow column composed of one hundred marble blocks ("Pesë bocetet finalist"). Obrija and Kiklas' winning proposal was – according to the architects – inspired by the form of the tower, the "traditional Albanian structure [that had] served as both dwelling and fortification" ("Pesë bocetet finalist"). The design (which was realized more or less as the architects proposed, although somewhat shorter) called for two vertical geometric forms, the corresponding halves of a tower split down the middle, realized in gleaming gold metal [Figure 3]. The outer surfaces of the bisected tower were to be covered with a grid of smaller squares, with space between the squares so that – at night – electric lights could produce radiance that would spill out through this grid [Figure 6]. The inner surfaces of the tower contained – in the two separate halves, respectively – the iconic double-headed eagle and an enlarged inscribed facsimile of Albania's Declaration of Independence, signed in the southern coastal city of Vlora in November of 1912.

Obrija and Kiklas' monument was self-consciously Modernist in its aesthetics (in the sense that it was characterized by the pursuit of abstraction to the extremes of pure geometry), and in fact it was initially accused of recalling too directly the forms of sculptors like Richard Serra.



Figure 6. The Tirana Independence Monument at night, photographed in summer 2013. Photo by the author.

There is more to be said about the function of this Modernist aesthetic (and I use the capital M to designate a relatively narrow trajectory of art-making that has been upheld – and rightfully challenged – as the primary trajectory of European and American fine art in the 20th century). However, perhaps the primary purpose served by the monument's formal adherence to a Modernist vocabulary was to distinguish it in an absolute sense from Albania's other Independence Monument, located in Vlora and inaugurated during the country's socialist years [Figure 7]. The Vlora Independence Monument, created by sculptors Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri and Mumtaz Dhrami, is one of the most impressive and imposing examples of monumental sculpture from Albania's socialist period, and it is emblematic of the country's rich tradition of Socialist Realism. The Vlora monument was inaugurated in November of 1972, during a period of relatively intense cultural production beginning in the late 1960s with Albania's own Cultural Revolution (partially coinciding with that occurring in China during roughly the same years) (Isto 77-79). The work was considered exemplary in socialist Albania, since – during its realization – the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha had written an open letter to the three sculptors, outlining the ideological and historical function of the monument. Not only was this intervention on the dictator's part considered to be emblematic of the regime's active interest in the arts, but Hoxha's characterization of the Vlora monument's purpose offered a model for the relationship of art and history. In his letter to Rama, Hadëri and Dhrami, Hoxha wrote that “in [the Vlora monument] we should see our own revolution moving forward, rising up. The imagination of the people should see, in the work you will create, that which it realized in the glorious National Liberation War, that which it is realizing today in the building of socialism” (1).

In other words, Hoxha wanted the Vlora Independence Monument to link together the key struggles of Albania's history, to structure a narrative of history that would emphasize not so much the past as the radical relation of the present to the future (Isto 77).



Figure 7. The Vlora Independence Monument, photographed in summer 2013. Photo by the author.

The monument was meant to connect Albania's independence from the Ottoman Empire with its liberation from fascism (in the National Liberation War, essentially coincident with the Second World War) and its ongoing project to build a socialist modernity. The sculptors achieved this narrative extension of history by symbolically unifying the space and time of the Albanian nation: they included figures dressed in the traditional garb of four of Albania's major regions, as well as a figure clearly depicting one of the intellectuals responsible for the Albanian 'National Awakening' that occurred in the end of the 19th and early 20th century. Finally, they included the figure of Ismail Qemali (also known as Ismail Kemal Bey), the first head of the Albanian state founded in 1912 and chief signatory of the Declaration of Independence (Vickers 68). Perhaps most importantly, however, the sculptors united these historic and symbolic figures beneath the 'New Man' of Albanian socialism: atop the Vlora monument they placed a young man holding the Albanian flag unfurled in fierce winds, gazing forward, poised to step off a sheer precipice and into the future.

It is the revolutionary quality of the Vlora monument's temporality – akin in a way to Walter Benjamin's concept of Messianic time (261-63) – that distinguishes it from the kind of eternal transition that I will argue is materialized in the Tirana Independence Monument. The difference between these two representations of history could be attributed to the differences between a socialist conception of history and a capitalist – or neoliberal – one, but this analysis threatens to arrive at a fairly one-dimensional characterization of what characterizes "socialist" or "capitalist" history. It is certainly the case that the Tirana Independence Monument's (almost over-)identification with the aesthetic ideals of Modernist abstraction indicates an attempt to distance its historical moment from that of the earlier Vlora Independence Monument. In short: a new kind of monument for a new age. The ideologically weighted language of figuration would have been too closely associated with Socialist Realism, and might have produced (unintentionally or not) a glorification of Albania's socialist past. Instead, Obrija and Kiklas chose to work within a strictly geometric idiom, and to instill their monument with legible meaning through the interaction of form, text and symbol.

It is important to note, of course, that the Vlora Independence Monument already performed a kind of abstraction of history and socialist Albanian life. In addition to the aesthetic effects of

monumental scale, the Vlora monument's figures are generalized and heroically ideal, marking them as distillations of historical experience that have been transmuted into a higher realm of significance. Furthermore, the monument's juxtaposition of figures from diverse historical moments results in the projection of a more comprehensive historical viewpoint (namely: the perspective of the socialist development of history). However, this kind of conceptual abstraction – endemic to socialist realism – is distinct from the schematic abstraction at work in the Tirana Independence Monument. In the Tirana monument, monumentality asserts a kind of autonomy from the experience of history. Instead of projecting an ideal or elevated representation of history, it abstracts this history by emphasizing its formal structures (geometric shapes, texts and symbols) rather than its protagonists (historical figures). In doing so, it no longer makes a claim on reflecting the revolutionary development of socialist society (as the Vlora Independence Monument did); instead, it charts a universal (because geometric) cartography within which all historical experience has already been comprehended as legible structures arranged across a surface. This schematization emphasizes a kind of temporal convergence or contemporaneity that I will discuss below, and it also tends towards both the visual and conceptual collapse of history into a single paradigm. Put differently, the Vlora Independence Monument's view of history depends substantially on the visible differences between the figures, differences that emphasize their dispersal throughout time and space (in different regions, from different eras of Albanian history). By contrast, the Tirana monument proceeds upon the presupposition of the sameness of history in terms of both form and content, a kind of fungibility of historical moments and interpretations.

Before continuing this consideration of the Tirana Independence Monument's formal qualities and their significance, I want to consider the second monument installed along the southern arm of Tirana's main boulevard as part of the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Albanian Independence in 2012. The second monument was inaugurated some distance south on the same side of the boulevard, across from the Rogner Hotel. Although spatially (and thus visually) remote from the Independence Monument, this second monument is both conceptually and aesthetically crucial to understanding the kind of history the Independence Monument represents. The second monument is Odhise Paskali's statue of statesman and national hero Ismail Qemali [Figure 8]. Modest in size (it is just over life-sized), the bronze statue had previously been housed in Tirana's

National History Museum; Paskali created it in 1982 shortly after the museum's opening, and until 2012 it remained installed in the museum, as part of the display devoted to the period of national independence ("Përrurohet shtatorja"). As such, the sculpture had played a role – albeit a minor one – in establishing the Albanian canon of historical figures under socialism. Or better, we might say, in reinforcing that canon – since Qemali's image in the 1972 Vlora monument no doubt played a much larger role in establishing this canon, from the point of view of artistic representation. In any case, however, Paskali's statue of Qemali lacks the heroic scale, the blunt features and exaggerated physique of quintessential Socialist Realist figures (such as the Qemali of the Vlora monument), and thus its appearance on the boulevard as part of the commemoration of independence must have seemed like a rather "safe" repurposing of socialist culture.

The Qemali statue's move to the boulevard, of course, was fundamentally an act of decontextualization: from the narrative space of the museum display, the figure moved to a wooded stretch of main street, set just back from the sidewalk.



Figure 8. Odhise Paskali's statue of Ismail Qemali, photographed in summer 2013. Photo by the author.

This decontextualization was further heightened, however, by the way that the statue was displayed in its new outdoor location: the sculpture was installed with an artificially chipped and eroded stone slab as a backdrop. The slab registers as an artificial ruin, and in its degraded state it recalls the numerous remnants of once-pristine socialist monuments scattered across Albania. Furthermore, the blank expanse of the stone symbolically erases the montages of photography and text that surrounded the work when it resided in the museum. The whole ensemble has the effect of casting Qemali's declaration of national independence as an event both disjointed from history and standing at its inception. "Thanks to this man, we are free," as then-Prime Minister Sali Berisha put it at the inauguration (qtd. in "Përurohet shtatorja"). Subsequent Albanian history stands indebted to Qemali, but it is indebted to a displaced fragment, a fragment that returns in a new guise.

Paskali's statue of Qemali, then, in its re-purposed guise, frames the simultaneous elusiveness and centrality of the idea of the origin that is taken up by Obrija and Kiklas' Independence Monument. There are two primary aspects to this complex treatment of the origin. The first relates to the idea of displacement and the universality of spatial experience. The second pertains to the Modernist paradigm of the grid and its significance for an understanding of history. Let us consider the first, the role played by displacement. As noted, the Qemali statue functions in large part by advertising its dislocation from a space of historical contextualization to a space apparently free of context. I say "apparently" since, of course, no work of art can truly be without context; but in this case the context is primarily that of the passerby's phenomenological encounter with the statue, and the fragmentary nature of the statue and its backdrop in fact seem to assert a new unity. In other words, the meaning of Qemali's act of establishing Albanian independence is meant to seem universal; it is meant to function as the structuring force of a new unity experienced by passersby. (In this sense, it performs the kind of aesthetic function Robert Ginsberg attributes to ruins, of establishing new wholes (155-56).)

The Tirana Independence Monument functions similarly, although its displacement is perhaps less obvious. It is important to note, however, that this displacement has been part of the monument's existence almost since its inception. Rosalind Krauss has argued that the "logic of the monument" (which for her is also the historical logic of sculpture up until the late 19th century) is that of

“commemorative representation. [The monument] sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place” (279). However, at the time that Obrija and Kiklas’ design for the monument was selected as the winning one, the destination of the monument still had not been decided (“Monumenti i Pavarësisë pa një shesh”). In fact, it is clear from discussions between then-Prime Minister Sali Berisha and his advisors that the monument was selected precisely because it seemed to rely primarily on interaction with its audience to produce its meanings, and not on its relation to a particular place (“Monumenti i 100-vjetorit”). The architects, however, did insist that the monument was intended to be placed in a park or other greenspace within the capital city (“Pavarësia, vendosja”). When a place for the monument was selected (in Youth Park), the work was installed directly on the ground, without any pedestal, a choice that emphasizes its conceptual mobility. Furthermore, the clear contrast (apparently intended) between the monument’s surrounding greenery and its own metallic surfaces strengthens the sense that the monument is a fundamentally foreign object that has been placed in a new context. In fact, fairly minimal changes were made to Youth Park to accommodate the work’s presence. Thus, the Independence Monument is not really a monument that “sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place” so much as a monument that sets out – through the force of its perceived presence – to create a new experience solely out of its interaction with viewers.

In fact, the element of the monument that most clearly divorces it visually from the surrounding nature of Youth Park is its gridded exterior. As Rosalind Krauss writes, “the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. [...] It is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature” (9). This is precisely how the Independence Monument works, visually. Again, the implicit contrast with the socialist-era Vlora Independence Monument could not be more explicit [compare Figures 3 and 7]. Whereas the Vlora monument models itself on natural formations, appearing to rise like a stone pillar from the earth, the Tirana monument asserts its separation in terms of both form and material from its surroundings, perhaps bearing some implied relationship to the architecture of the city but no immediate resemblance to its surrounding space. There is also, as Krauss argues, a temporal aspect to the grid: it both aggressively asserts the newness of Modernist art, and at the same time – by asserting the simultaneity of different

moments in time represented within the grid – it undercuts narrative (12-13). Both of these aspects of the grid are operative in the Tirana monument. I have already described the ways the monument positions itself as “new” in distinction to the Socialist Realism of the Vlora monument. However, it is also significant that the monument uses the grid to oppose the kind of revolutionary narrative of history posited by the Vlora monument. The two versions of history are closely related however, since both rely on the repetition of historical moments to structure the meanings they project. Visar Obrija, in a press conference given shortly before the monument was inaugurated, noted that the work was meant to convey the idea that “independence is not something that happens once, but is a condition that stretches out over time” (qtd. in “Pavarësia, vendosja”). This is, in a way, not unlike Hoxha’s call for the Vlora monument to materialize the perpetual advance of socialism’s revolutionary construction. Nonetheless, there is something in the aesthetic of the Tirana monument that separates it conceptually as well as visually from the socialist-era work, and this difference has to do with the operation of the grid.

There is an undeniable “all-overness” to the aesthetic of the grid as it manifests in Obrija and Kiklas’ monument. The outer surfaces of the monument offer no relief from the relentless regularity of the gridded surface, and in doing so they make the work “impenetrable” from the outside. That is to say, the meaning of the monument cannot be readily gleaned from its exterior because it displays no visual evidence that would suggest an element of transition, or increased or decreased relevance. While this sheer and overwhelming order may invite engagement – as one is drawn closer to examine each individual and essentially identical facet of the monument’s exterior – it is not “readable.” True to Krauss’ characterization of the grid, the monument’s exterior is antimimetic to the extreme. However, even if one is drawn by this inscrutability to approach and gaze into the interior of the monument’s bisected halves, the grid continues to structure the work’s visual meaning. In fact, it is only in the case of the double-headed eagle that an aspect of this meaning appears to escape the grid – since the eagle is constituted from a raised plane of metal. Even so, it is neatly aligned to the grid’s spatial order, as if pinned down by an invisible logic. In the case of the text of the Declaration of Independence, the grid is even more ruthless in its transformation of meaning: the inevitable lines of the panel edges cut across the facsimile of the Declaration, diving words and names without care for their relative significance. In fact, if anything, the grid’s

application to the text of the Declaration empties the document to the point of insignificance. The text's incision on the metal plates pales in comparison to the primordial character of the grid, which seems both to arise from beneath the text and to have been imposed over the top of it.

This uncertainty – the uncertainty of before or after, the question of whether the grid predates the text of independence or comes after it as a retrospective and impartial ordering of history – returns us to the suggestion I made at the outset: about the way the Independence Monument hovers between the assertion of natality and the haunting condition of spectrality. We are now in a better position to understand what these entwined positions mean in relation to the image of Albanian contemporary history and the construction of national identity. Before we proceed, however, we must consider another monumental addition to Tirana's axial boulevard, this one occurring four months after the Independence Monument's inauguration.

4. Two Histories, One Space

On March 26, 2013, a new memorial complex was installed just a few meters north along the boulevard from Paskali's statue of Qemali, diagonally opposite the Prime Minister's building [Figure 9]. The complex was a collaboration between the well-known critic Fatos Lubonja and artist Ardian Isufi. It consists of three objects (or perhaps more accurately, three fragments of environments): a set of concrete pillars from the gallery of the Spaç forced labor mining camp; a piece of the Berlin Wall; and a concrete bunker that once guarded the entrance to "the Block" [Blloku], the protected and segregated area of Tirana where the political elite resided during the socialist years. The memorial is entitled Postbllok, a term that translates as "Checkpoint" – although this translation loses the play on words present in the original, since the memorial to the socialist past is also "post-Bllok" in the temporal sense. (Currently, "the Block" is perhaps the area of Tirana most strongly associated with capitalist consumption: it is full of trendy bars, clubs and expensive restaurants. It is, without a doubt, the capitalist twin of its former socialist identity.) In a number of ways, the installation of the Postbllok complex serves as a logical aesthetic extension of the relocated Qemali statue and the Independence Monument. If the Qemali statue exemplifies a straightforward form of classical figuration, and the Independence Monument a quintessential high

Modernist geometricity, then the assembled components of Postbllok are emblematic of a postmodern approach to history.

However, to label Postbllok “postmodern” would be to ignore the singular clarity of its message.



Figure 9. The Postbllok Memorial, photographed in summer 2013. Photo by the author.

At its inauguration, Lubonja explained that this “Memorial to Communist Isolation” would stand as a reminder of those “who were not able to survive the period of [socialist] dictatorship” (qtd. in “PostBlloku’ në hyrje”). Thus, Postbllok is in fact an attempt at a quite earnest form of commemoration, even if its formal strategy is comparable to the historical eclecticism of postmodernism. The memorial strikes a position between national and transnational narratives. On the one hand, the presence of the fragment of the Berlin Wall links Albania’s experience with socialist dictatorship to the broader experience of Eastern European nations up till 1989. On the other hand, the pillars from the gallery of the Spaç mine – socialist Albania’s most infamous prison camp – and the concrete bunker represent uniquely national histories.

The bunker is but one of approximately 700,000 such structures that Enver Hoxha ordered built throughout Albania between the late 1960s and the mid 1980s, to be manned in the event of a foreign invasion (Galaty, Stocker, and Watkinson 176). These bunkers continue to dot Albania’s landscape (although many of them have been removed or gradually covered over by the

landscape itself), and they have become one of the most iconic symbols of the paranoia of Hoxha's regime. Above all else, the bunkers functioned (and, in some ways, symbolically continue to function) to form the space of the Albanian nation as a confined space, as an interior posited in sharp contradistinction to an exterior. In a similar fashion, Lubonja and Isufi's sculptural complex is meant to be physically occupied: one stands within the skeleton of Spaç's gallery, one descends into the bunker and look out at the world. In doing so one relives the sensation of real and metaphorical enclosure that – so the memorial insists – characterized Albanian socialism.

Although Postbllok and the Independence Monument are very different kinds of monuments (indeed, one could hardly imagine more different aesthetic choices), what is interesting is the way they project a similar vision of the space of the Albanian nation. As I noted above, Obrija and Kiklas based their monument on the tower, the Albanian building type that traditionally served both as home and as fortification (“Pesë bocetet finalist”). Thus, the bunker in Postbllok and the gleaming tower of the Independence Monument are in fact analogous structures, no matter how distinct they may be aesthetically. Furthermore, the installation of Postbllok only four months after the inauguration of the Independence Monument had an unfortunate (although probably unintended) consequence: it suggested a spatio-temporal equation between Albania during the Ottoman period and Albania during the socialist years. Since Obrija and Kiklas' monument represented the dual condition of enclosure and opening out to freedom (“Pavarësia, vendosja”), and since Postbllok similarly recalled the enclosure of socialism in contrast to contemporary openness, the two monuments effectively folded two histories over onto each other, making them more difficult to distinguish.

It is this curious folding that heightens the effect of haunting that pervades the sense of history produced by the Independence Monument. The monument is first of all a monument to natality, to rebirth in Arendt's sense: it signals the possibility of something new coming into the world at any moment, the perpetuation of the time when the new can emerge as such. The dislocation of its redoubled halves keeps this space open, available. However, this space is only kept open through continuous juxtaposition with its perceived opposite, with oppressive enclosure – in other words, with un-freedom. This, according to the monument's logic, is the condition that characterized the Ottoman years (and this is certainly a characterization that is open to serious historical debate, but

such a discussion is beyond the scope of the present analysis). Furthermore, when considered in the broader chronology of monumental inaugurations, the parallelism between the Independence Monument and Postbllok suggests that this condition of un-freedom, of enclosure, was the same condition that was endemic to Albanian socialism. Indeed, it suggests that the two shared the same spatial boundaries (the boundaries of the Albanian nation itself, envisioned as architectural enclosure), and even that the latter was a repetition of the former. Not even a repetition: it suggests the two were identical. In this identity between these two metaphorical spaces, the enclosed space of the Ottoman years and the enclosed space of the socialist years, history collapses into a kind of totalizing contemporaneity.

This totalizing contemporaneity that threatens our awareness of history and historicity, however, is forever haunted by its own disjuncture, by its doubling. In a sense, this doubling is analogous to the double coding that architectural theorist Charles Jencks identifies as a critical aspect of postmodernist architecture: the ability to convey a direct or popular meaning (in this case, the appeal to shared national memory) and at the same time to ironize or deconstruct that meaning (here, a move performed both by Modernist abstraction and by the work's gradual ruination and reconstruction) (19, 101). This doubling occurs metaphorically, as I have shown, in the analogy formed between two periods of Albanian history. It also occurs, visually, in the form of the Independence Monument itself: the doubling of the tower into its halves in fact perpetuates itself ad infinitum in the dissolution of the tower into the endless regularity of the grid. It occurs again in the disjuncture between the monument and its surroundings, between the work and any sense of its place. It is probably unsurprising that these dislocations subtly haunt a monument to national independence, and thus implicitly to national identity. After all, as Derrida writes, "All national rootedness ... is rooted first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced – or displaceable – population" (103). It is precisely this kind of displaceability that defensive and monolithic architectural forms like the bunker or the tower seek to defeat, since they assert a defensible autochthony.

5. Failures, Simulations

Let us return to the Tirana Independence Monument as ruin. This is, implicitly, to return to the monument as a failure in a number of different ways. An aesthetic failure, in the sense that its form was not sufficiently comprehensible to engender the respect that might have prevented its audience from ignoring it, vandalizing it. A material failure, in the sense that its surfaces could not hold their sheen, could not preserve the image of longevity that nearly all monuments are called upon to convey. A political failure, in that the monument was received as evidence of the Berisha government's fundamental lack of good artistic taste, not to mention its general inability to realize public projects. And yet, I want to conclude by arguing that as an image of history – of a particular kind of history – the Independence Monument was in fact a success, and a rather striking one.

There are a number of ways in which the monument was successful, and perhaps the most interesting was the way its image of rebirth prefigured subsequent Albanian political rhetoric. Specifically, in June of 2013, painter and Socialist Party leader Edi Rama (longtime opponent of Democratic Party leader and Prime Minister between 2005 and 2013, Sali Berisha) was elected Prime Minister. Rama's rhetoric was and remains one of renewal: his reforms since entering office are collectively referred to under the broad concept of "Rilindja," or "Re-naissance." Thus, the Independence Monument's visual and conceptual rhetoric seems oddly prescient in retrospect, and there is no doubt that its Modernist aesthetics seem to perfectly parallel Rama's own Modernist proclivities as a painter and designer. For Rama, as for the designers of the Independence Monument, everything must be made anew *ex nihilo* (Van Gerven Oei, "Unofficial 83"), and the natality that becomes available in such a space has no understanding of history.

This assertion of absolute freedom derived from absolute natality, of the perpetually recurring liminal moment of transition, is the uncritical half of the Independence Monument's existence as an image of history. The other side of this double existence is the monument's haunting pseudo-presence, its presence as a ruin. As a ruin, the monument reveals that its doubling does not initiate an identical repetition of history, but a folding that covers over the historicity of events. When mayor Erion Veliaj declared, "A good city is a city that remembers" on the occasion of the monument's reconstruction in November of 2015, he was speaking of a different kind of memory, a different kind of historical consciousness, than that which the monument ideally engenders. Veliaj was essentially appealing to the citizens of Tirana to stop treating the Independence Monument as

the kind of historical artifact it in fact is. He was asking them to stop participating in the monument's construction of an anxious, spectral kind of history of the present, and instead to believe again as a purely ahistorical image. He was asking the citizens of Tirana to help him disguise the Independence Monument as a monument to the past when in fact it is a quintessential monument to the present. That is what the monument's gradual decay made clear – because in the process of ongoing ruination between 2012 and 2015, the monument represented a very clear history of the image under late capitalism.

As I noted at the outset, the Independence Monument's progressive decomposition passed through the stages Baudrillard identifies with the triumph of simulation: it first stood for “the reflection of a profound reality”; it then “mask[ed] and denature[d]” that reality; in continuing to exist in spite of its assisted degradation, it covered over the fact that no deeper reality existed; and finally its doubled surface severed all ties to reality and stood as “pure simulacrum” (6). Veliaj's appeal to memory was in fact an appeal to the citizens of Tirana to dwell in the final stage of this historical transformation, to live entirely in the realm of the simulation and redoubled surface as if living in collective memory.

This obsessive attraction to the ahistorical surface is characteristic of many of Veliaj's projects as Tirana's mayor.



Figure 10. The repainted surfaced of Piramida, photographed in winter 2015. Photo by the author.

For example, in August of 2015, Veliaj undertook a project to renovate the massive structure in Tirana's center known as the Pyramid [Piramida] by painting over its graffitied marble walls with gray paint (Van Gerven Oei, "Unofficial 93") [Figure 10]. The same strategy – renovation conceived as the application of a thick new coat of paint – was applied to the Mother Albania monument located in Tirana's national cemetery. This fixation on the superficial, on the effacement of history through perpetual renewal of the simulated surface, is one possible response to the complexities that confront Albania in the new epoch of neoliberalism. It is one way to continually re-assemble the fiction of national(ist) identity. Against this, however, one might assert an understanding of the historicity of the perpetually renewed surface, a history of the simulation. As a ruin, the Tirana Independence Monument unfolded just such a history, and this is the promise that the monument still holds, if we do not confuse our memory of the renewed image with the renewed image's lack of memory.

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[2] All translations from Albanian to English are the author's own, unless otherwise noted.



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