

IRENA LAGATOR

THE MONUMENT IS ON GOOGLE EARTH

It was that long preCovid winter when a group of artists discovered the Cetinje Biennials archive whose five editions were compiled between 1991 and 2004. Unavailable for more than 15 years, the archive seemed to be a time capsule holding the roots of critical contemporary art in their grey-economy captured state. Culture, solidarity and the local common heritage were fading out rapidly over the preceding 35 years, all the more reason why these artists made so that the archive would quickly grow into a precious repository for sharing knowledge.

One of the artists returned time and time again to a photo of an audience at the 3rd Cetinje biennial. The photo shows the spectators intently focused on a piano solo concert. Among them, seated in the first row, is Svetlana Kana Radević, the architect, philosopher of spatial thought, a patient listener who would often repeat: *social engagement turns aesthetics into an ethical act*. Addressing urgent topics, Cetinje biennials were the *avant garde* of the 90s and early 2000s – piercing, critical eyes in the then dark times reigning in the region.

Seeing Kana in the photo, the artist inevitably thinks back to brighter times – her childhood spent in a kindergarten designed by the renowned architect. Spacious pavilions full of light unflaggingly streaming through large windows, letting in all the surrounding apple, pear and quince trees to seemingly inhabit the inner space. Seeing Kana, also born in Cetinje, meant awakening the sense of communion in that space where windows were still-life paintings of fruit. The artist realizes: space for Kana was always about giving, sharing, learning; never about building alone.

As the first female architect in Montenegro, the only woman in socialist Yugoslavia ever to receive the prestigious Borba award for architecture, Kana was also a devoted landscape researcher. Advocating against separating culture from nature, she also experimented with the constructive functions of sculptural form in her projects.

She famously entitled one of her best-known pieces *Flowers*. Infused with nature, this memorial complex is devoted to the 452 fallen in the region of *Lješanska nahija* during the Balkan and two World Wars. As its name denotes, it was inspired by clusters of flowers, though stone was used as its natural material, with the whole presented as an acoustic amphitheater layered above historic lower segments. A concrete sculpture in the forefront represents a torch as a symbol of freedom and revolution. Using the concept of the amphitheater as place of learning, remembering and debating, Kana's *Flowers* reminds us that history and the future always meet in the present. To have a future we cannot neglect learning from the mistakes in history. And in this regard, she often used to repeat: *One of the most difficult architectural tasks is a monument*.

The space of the amphitheater returns in another of Kana's works: her Lexicographic center in the middle of what was then Titograd, nowadays Podgorica. Arguably the smallest amphitheater in the world, it is now neglected by its keepers: wildflowers and creepers in the company of a tall fig tree constantly seeking light, peacefully occupy this space meant for learning and dialogue.

However, architecturally somewhere between *Flowers* and the diminutive amphitheater, another work by Kana stood for decades. Formally akin to *Flowers*, this was a monument to the *People's Revolution* during WWII. Among its 72 victims, four were national heroes, three of them women: Djina Vrbica, Ljubica Popović and Jelena Četković. Three state kindergartens in Podgorica still bear their names today. However, during the so-called process of "New City Building" by a private real-estate company, this monument was relocated to the agro-industrial district, a transition zone on the outskirts of Podgorica. The ruthless interests of capitalism, its intrusion and desecration, marks the end of the solidarity era during which Kana would often reiterate: *The growth of the city does not mean addition*.

This double paradox drove the artist to find out where this monument had been displaced, but for years could find nothing like it in any corner of the periphery of Podgorica. However, through dogged determination she finally does find it, untouched, in all its glory, but in a very unexpected place – on Google Earth. Because Google did not update its map of Montenegro regularly, its representation of her monument on this proprietary Earth could be seen, right there at its original location. On the real Earth, however, it had been disassembled, its numbered pieces languishing somewhere to be reassembled once again. During the monument's life on Google Earth, the artist was a member of an art and science board at a state institution. In 2022 she distributed a forgotten investigative journalist's 2018 paper about the missing monument entitled *Garages instead of a cultural good*.

It was during a postCovid summer afternoon that the artist actually visited the monument reconstructed on the city outskirts, in an industrial transit zone flanked by what appeared to be a few oil cisterns. No visitors, no passersby, no viewers. The artist climbs some stairs that were never part of the original monument, passes between two giant white stone trash bins, also added to the original, and reads a plaque indicating 2018 as the year of the conservation-supervised reconstruction of the displaced monument. The only trace of its original form and location remains on Google Earth.

In the meantime strategically updated, Google Earth makes the artist wonder while picturing Kana there in the audience of the archive photo: What are we leaving each other, the real Earth, or Google's version? Has the grey economy in the meantime conquered history and cultural heritage in order to trade and play with time, years and memory? If the transit zone *is an area where people wait or goods are kept between different stages of a journey*, what do we get when we encounter a monument in such areas? Are there colours on Google Earth, is there any form of art, of memory? Can we allow ourselves to build anything new today without looking as far back as our memories can go?

Thus, the artist is moved to read Kana's words: *A monument serves to fix a particular act for future generations. However, this fixing does not imply forgetfulness. Therefore, a monument must be integrated into the cycle of life. I do not endorse a monument that is experienced in a single moment of intense emotions, in agony, in suffering, but rather one that provides a continuous experience: one that embodies a release of reverence and dignity; one that evokes the feeling that life triumphs over death*.

This story was written on the occasion of the collaboration with Antje Majewski within the framework of her installation *Entity*, exhibited at the *Future Perfect* exhibition curated by Angelika Stepken and Philipp Ziegler at Art Gallery „Miodrag Dado Đurčić“, National Museum of Montenegro, Cetinje in collaboration with Goethe Institut, Serbia, 2024.