

PRACTICES

Counter-Non-Anti-Remembrance. The Anti-monumental Practices by TIST Collective

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ABSTRACT

In the recent decades, monumentality has been significantly reconsidered with its symbolic materiality and agency in public spaces. *Counter-, non-, and anti-*monumental practices have emerged on the scene of contemporary art as a new, critical mode of commemorative and social ritual. While addressing the well-known query on whether monumentality can still be considered a valid tool able to synthesize and keep the collective memory, the current paper investigates the remembrance practices by TIST collective (Italy). In the last two years TIST implemented a series of artistic actions in the urban space designed to address the emergence and endurance of a commemorative community and the possibility of remembrance as a public ritual.

KEYWORDS

Monumentality; Remembrance; Public space; Collectivity; Urban rituals

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In the poem of 1833, *The Bronze Horseman*, Alexander Pushkin described how the equestrian monument to Peter the Great came to life and chased a young man Evgenii to death for having dared the statue (and the state power it represents) by blaming it for the flood that had taken the life of his fiancée.¹ Two centuries earlier, Molière had transformed a statue—of the Commander—into the weapon of retaliation for Don Juan’s despicable behavior and, above all, for having challenged and provoked the commemorative sculpture, alias the supreme power.² For centuries, monuments have been designed to keep a collective memory of a subject worth enduring in time by claiming some absolute value beyond the moment’s social, political, or cultural conditions. The phenomenon of *statuomania* is related to the consolidation of national states between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the historical process urban realities still have to face.³ Due to world conflicts and the revision in urban planning and architectural sociability, monumentality has been significantly reconsidered with its symbolic materiality and agency in public spaces.

The very nature of a memorial as a provider for one version of a story renders the memory of its creators vulnerable and open to contestation. By glorifying one narrative, a monument wipes out all others. While celebrating a virtue, its symbolic pathos implies a condemnation of sin. The special intangible might that a monument claims to embody has turned into its Achilles’ heel. At the end of World War II, all Nazi symbols were destroyed by order of the occupation authorities. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the massive removal of Soviet memorials has since been an increasing trend in Eastern Europe. The physical demolition of their statues underlined the defeat of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Gaddafi in 2011. Over a hundred Confederate monuments have been removed in the last decade after protests guided by African American and civil rights activist associations.

On the one hand, contemporary revisionist tendencies (both progressive and conservative) re-examine historical facts, leaving little space for an affirmative message. On the other hand, while giving voice to the communities that have been oppressed and deprived of the right to (self) representation, identity politics questions the possibility of elaborating a common message. Memorials, sharing the public space of daily life and thus insisting on being rooted in the present, are often denied the same peaceful historicization and museumification guaranteed to the works of art. Their aesthetic qualities are subservient to the symbolic pathos they represent. Even if considered obsolete or drained out of meaning, monumental symbols firmly tie victors to victims, ready to reveal their explosive

1 Alexander Pushkin, “The Bronze Horseman,” in *The Bronze Horseman: Selected Poems of Alexander Pushkin*, ed. D. M. Thomas (New York: Viking Pr., 1982).

2 Molière, *Don Juan* (New York: Ecco, 2001).

3 Sergiusz Michalski, *Public monuments: Art in political bondage 1870–1997* (New York: Reaktion Book, 1998).

potential at any moment.⁴ In light of these facts, we would like to address the following query: is monumentality still a valid tool able to synthesize and keep the collective memory in the public space?

In recent decades, *counter-*, *non-*, and *anti-monumental* practices have emerged on the scene of contemporary art as a new, critical mode of commemorative and social ritual.⁵ Among the prominent examples of this tendency, there are the *Monument Against Fascism* (1986) and the *2146 Stones – Monument Against Racism* (1990-93) by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, the *Bataille* (2002), *Gramsci* (2013) and *Deleuze* (2021) *Monuments* by Thomas Hirschhorn, *Legarsi alla montagna/Sich an den Berg binden* (1981) by Marina Lai, the *Nike Ground* (2003) by Eva and Franco Mattes, the series *Momentary Monuments* (s. 2009) by Lara Favaretto. While a traditional monument glorifies a person or an event suggesting permanence and persistence in forms and materials implied, the anti-monumental works reflect a polyphony of voices assuming a fragile, temporal appearance. The monument has a prominent position separated from or towering over the space of the everyday; on the contrary, the anti-monuments are weather movable or camouflaged in urban fabric. The monument demands from the public just one sense—the sight—and is designed to be viewed from a distance with solemnity and deference; the anti-monument invites close, physical encounters, urging viewers to become users through participation.⁶ The mentioned characteristics of the counter-monumental practices reflect the so-called collective, participatory, social turn present in contemporary art since the second half of the twentieth century.

Since the 1990s, digital multimedia technologies have expanded to such an extent as to generate a domestication of the virtual, which is increasingly widespread in the analog space of action.⁷ Augmented reality, or AR, has become a new tool to re-think the conception of the human habitat and its cultural heritage. The new generation of artists and activists master the space on the intersection of the virtual and the concrete and implement new rituals of remembrance. Among many others, this is the case of the interventions by the collective Manifest. AR during the Occupy Movement (2011), the app *Actual RealityOS* (2019) by Hito Steyerl, *La statua che non c'è* (2020) by Cantiere in Milan, and the Monuments Project

4 Chto Delat, "Editorial," *Face to Face With the Monument*. *Chto Delat Newspaper*, no.37 (2014): 2.

5 James F. Osborne, "Counter-monumentality and the Vulnerability of Memory," *Journal of Social Archaeology*, no. 17(2) (2017): 163–187.

6 Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck, Ruth Fazakerley, "Counter-monuments: the Anti-monumental and the Dialogic," *The Journal of Architecture*, 17:6 (December 2012):951-972.

7 Lev Manovich, "The Poetics of the Augmented Space," *Visual Communication*, no. 5(2) (2006): 219–240.

(2021) by Movers and Shakers.⁸ The irruption of the virtual into the concrete environment has a constructive effect since it contributes to reflecting on our behavior and interactions in the cityscape.

However, one more aspect makes traditional monumentality look odd nowadays: the impossibility of commemoration itself, or better, the infeasibility of a lasting commemoration. The historian Jay Winter indicates that the primary condition for a memorial is not the object in charge of this function but the existence of a commemorative community.⁹ A place, a gadget, or a ritual becomes celebratory when the intention behind it is accepted by the audience that encounters the object in its habitat, uses it, or engages in a specific observance.¹⁰ In order to transform memory into a memorial, we need a community that shares a common point of view on what needs to be remembered. The artistic practices we will examine further address precisely the point of our interest: the emergence and endurance of a commemorative community and the possibility of remembrance as a public ritual.

TIST collective was founded in 2020 in Bologna by Michele Liparesi and Yulia S. Tikhomirova to address the consequences of managing the pandemic, particularly harmful to the independent art scene.¹¹ The artists, joined later by Samir Sayed Abdellattef and Enrico Vassallo, renounced to transfer their practices online and reunited to reflect on the new directions to develop, starting from the principle of non-competition and care. The anti-monumental operation was one of these new directions approached by TIST in two complementary but opposing manners: the destruction of an object-monument through collective use and the construction of a *lieu de mémoire* through collective commitment.

The first artistic device used by TIST for the anti-monumental practice was implemented by Michele Liparesi in 2016 in Florence. At times, still a student from the sculpture department of Fine Arts Academy, Liparesi observed the complete conversion of the city into an open-air museum at the service of tourists. As the artist claimed:

For young artists, there was simply no physical space left to use for any kind of activity in the urban space. The city was overwhelmed by monuments cordoned off, guarded, and prohibited from touching or using in any way. At the same time, the rent prices were growing dizzyingly, forcing students to move out to the periphery or to leave.¹²

8 Roberto Paolo Malaspina, Sofia Pirandello, "Memoria interattiva. Contro-monumenti in realtà aumentata," *Roots-Routes. Research on Visual Cultures*, no. 35 (January–April 2021), <https://www.roots-routes.org/memoria-interattiva-contro-monumenti-in-realta-aumentata-di-roberto-paolo-malaspina-e-sofia-pirandello/> Accessed June 16, 2023.

9 Jay Winter, "Sites of Memory and the Shadow of War," in *Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 61–77.

10 Mischa Gabowitsch, "Soviet War Memorials: a Few Biographical Remarks," *Face to Face with the Monument. Chto Delat Newspaper*, no.37 (2014): 6–8.

11 TIST collective website, <https://tistcollective.org/> Accessed June 16, 2023.

12 Conversation with Michele Liparesi, archive of Yulia S. Tikhomirova, January 12, 2023.

This emergency gave rise to the *A Living Unit* project. Liparesi constructed a device that looked like a typical eighteenth-century statue on a vigorously decorated pedestal, perfect for camouflaging in the decorum of any Florence square. The sculpture represented the artist himself, dressed according to the fashion of past centuries, looking from up to down at the passers-by.



FIG. 1 Michele Liparesi, *A Living Unit*, 2017. Bologna. Courtesy of the artist.

Nonetheless, it was the pedestal to be the central part of the operation: the 2- meters-high and 1-meter-wide booth appeared to be a *classic* basement embellished with plaster moldings. By approaching it, however, the viewer realized that the whole ensemble was made of recycled wood and reused utensils and could be, at best, considered a prototype for an actual monument yet to come. Moreover, the object was on wheels, so the artist could effortlessly push it around the streets despite its imposing size. The plaster decorations, in turn, represented genre scenes and inscriptions that gave precise instructions: all four sides of the monument were to open and utilize deconstructing, thus, the whole complex. Once dismantled, the (anti)monumental structure offered a functional kitchen, a table with footstools, a desk with an armchair, bookshelves, and a bed—a complete *living unit* for a student or a citizen who had faced the housing crisis.

In 2021, after the lockdown was eased, TIST's members employed *A Living Unit* to address a new emergency: the fear of physicality and the long-lasting consequences this fear produced on the social relationships between people in the urban context. Liparesi's prototype was freed from the sculpture on top, and the artists have focused on the further function of the device: to catalyze social encounters in the public space. The collective would push the *A Living Unit* around peripheral streets and make occasional stops offering coffee and wine to the passers-by. Based in the industrial outskirts of Bologna, in Rastignano, the collective was aware that the periphery residents would be the last category to return to



FIG. 2 Michele Liparesi, *A Living Unit*, 2017. Bologna. Courtesy of the artist.

everyday sociability after the lockdown, having already been deprived of social and cultural infrastructure even before the pandemic. Furthermore, the remoteness of marginal zones made it easier to transform an artistic gesture into a social participatory practice. Far from tourist sights, these areas were inhabited by residents who crossed the same streets and faced similar problems.



FIG. 3 TIST, *A Living Unit*, 2021. Videostill. Rastignano. Courtesy of the artists.

A Living Unit acted as an attraction or a pretext for physical encounters and dialogue, fulfilling the function of a missing social catalyst and bringing people together. Considering our paper's main query, we affirm that the artistic device boosted the emergence of a temporary community, even if still not commemorative. In order to become the latter, a significant event that could influence the lives of the most, binding them to the same recollection, was necessary. As we write this article, in June 2023, the Rastignano's inhabitants are living through the aftermath of the recent

flood the Emilia Romagna region faced at the end of May. The cataclysm destroyed river embankments, roads and interrupted circulation in the zone, affecting everyday life. It is still early to assert the emergence of the recurrent remembrance practice related to this event; however, TIST's members have already witnessed how the newly emerged community gets together to address the city council and demand responsibility for the mismanagement that caused such heavy consequences.

In 2022, TIST was invited to exhibit in the Public Space Museum of Bologna in the framework of the Urban Therapy Festival. Together with the *A Living Unit*, TIST has exposed a conceptual prospect on the possible outcomes of the anti-monumental projects. *The Possible Future Anti-Monument Units* map had a futuristic impetus inspired partially by Archigram, an avant-garde British architectural group, and partially by the same post-pandemic social unease we mentioned above. Such units as *Let's Play*, *Stellarium for Two*, or *A Booth for a Forced Dialogue* indulged in ironic and provocative forms rather than projected solutions to realize concretely.



FIG. 4 TIST, *Possible Future Anti-Monument Units*, 2022. Public Space Museum, Bologna. Courtesy of the artists.

At the end of the exhibition, which lasted one month, the Museum's direction organized a street performance inviting TIST collective to repeat Rastignano's experience and to bring the *A Living Unit* outside in the neighborhood. Although the event was successful in terms of audience and media coverage, we cannot but underline that the very contest of the contemporary art milieu undermined the work's concept. On the one hand, the art public perceived the anti-monument as a product of pure creativity, an art object free from any concrete emergency. On the other hand, even if curious, the local residents did not have enough time to engage with the project: a single event was insufficient for them to approach the device, let alone build connections. This experience proved to TIST's members

that “the Booth cannot exist but down the street. The places of art exhibit purely the shell while all the meaning is totally gone.”¹³



FIG. 5 TIST, *A Living Unit*, 2022. Bologna. Courtesy of the artists.

Even if the *Possible Future Anti-Monument Units* were not thought up to be fabricated, one of them, the *Sound Booth*, turned out to be a fruitful idea for the teenagers of the small town near Vienna–Hollabrunn, where TIST’s members spent time in residency organized by the local curatorial team AIRInSilo, in March 2022. The artists were positively intrigued by the number of schools Hollabrunn offered and the flow of young people who passed through the town daily from neighboring communities. TIST found this situation particularly stimulating to work on and proposed a social anti-monument for the younger generation who suffered from the lack of cultural and leisure facilities. The *Sound Booth* has become the *SoundInSilo Anti-monument for Hollabrunn*, which is still ongoing work, currently at the planning stage. It visually recalls the early twentieth-century



FIG. 6 TIST, *SoundInSilo Anti-monument for Hollabrunn*, 2022. Render. Courtesy of the artists.

13 Ref.: Conversation with TIST’s members, archive of Yulia S. Tikhomirova, May 31, 2023.

shed construction. Its design is inspired by the particular architecture of two silo storages one sees arriving at the town's train station. The appearance fits the place from the urbanistic point of view while taking advantage of the *triviality* of its look that accentuates the surprise effect once the booth is opened.

The anti-monument will offer tables and seats and will be supplied with integrated sound speakers with a plug-in or Bluetooth system to facilitate connection to one's phone. It will encourage the public sharing of music, radio, or audiobooks. SoundInSilo has a sliding roof to keep the sound located not to disturb the neighborhood and protect the listeners from sun or rain. For this project, TIST aims to involve the local community directly in the research, planning, and production activity. The artists intend to engage the students of the Hollabrunner Technik Leistungszentrums, one of the town's leading technical high schools, in all phases of the work and cooperate with the local student radio station RadioYpsilon in communication plan and cultural program. This strategy aims to stimulate direct commitment and participation rather than simple curiosity. Besides the clear social function, which is to provide the younger people with a cultural facility that they will have to self-manage together, the idea is to leave the



FIG. 7

TIST, *Anti-fascist Anti-monument. Temporary But Resistant*, 2022. Bologna. Courtesy of the artists.

meaning of this operation as open as possible and to let it grow naturally through usage.

Another example of the anti-monumental practice by TIST has to do with the opposite process—the construction of a *lieu de mémoire* through collective commitment. According to the French historian Pierre Nora, places of memory are not necessarily restricted to specific locations. Everything that generates a symbolic meaning to which a given social

ANTI-MONUMENTO RESISTENTE

Il gioco dei 100 mattoni anti-fascista per costruire una identità politica collettiva

tist

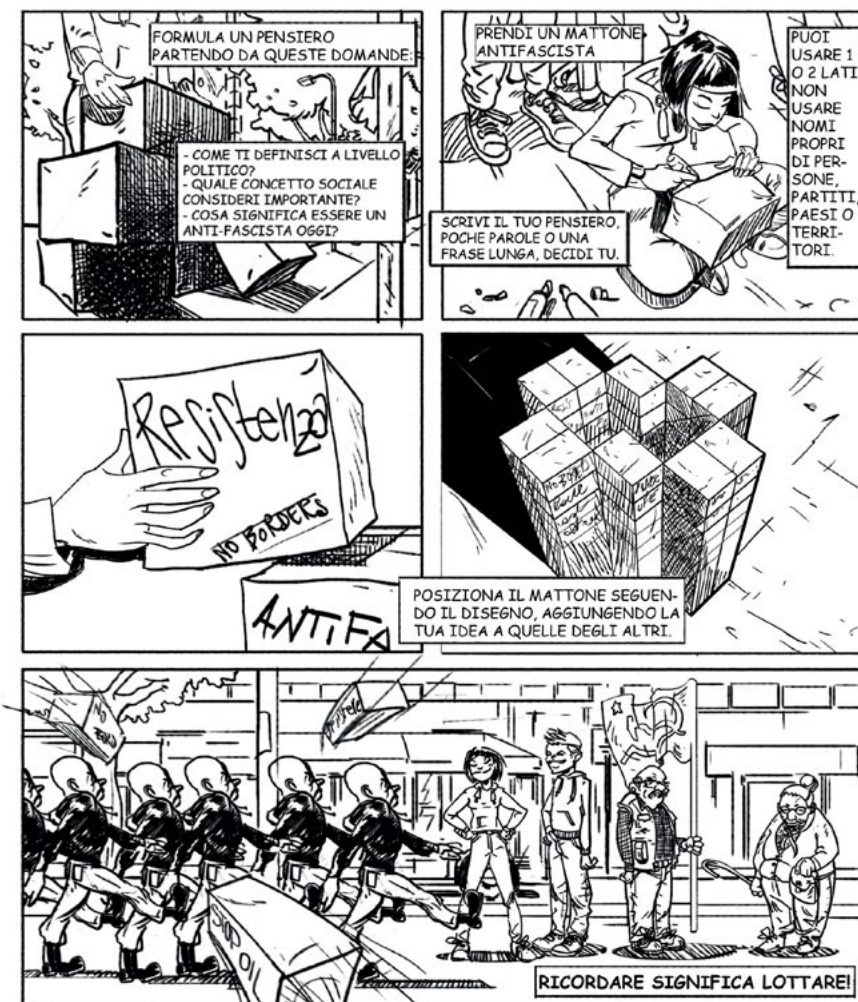


FIG. 8

TIST, *Anti-fascist Anti-monument. Temporary But Resistant*, 2022. Flyer. Bologna. Courtesy of the artists.

group can relate to it a place, object, or period, can be called a place of memory.¹⁴ The onset for such a procedure starts with identifying a community that already shares common values and spaces and offering it an idea that can structure a collective remembrance ritual. The *Anti-fascist Anti-monument. Temporary But Resistant* project was implemented in November 2022 in the framework of the street festival *Oltre Il Ponte (Beyond the Bridge)*, dedicated to the anti-fascist resistance and the memory of the partisan battle that took place in 1944 in the Bolognina district of Bologna. The celebration of the Battle of the Bolognina coincided with a completely different kind of anniversary—the centenary of the march on Rome of the fascist militias, which ended with the takeover of power by Benito Mussolini. Thus, TIST’s members decided to address an urgent

14 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

query—the significance of anti-fascism in the current circumstances—by letting citizens formulate their own social positions and elaborate a collective political identity.

The operation occurred on a busy street near the festival's location and lasted one day, from early morning to late night. Here again, the artists had prepared art devices in advance and had conceived some initial rules that would catalyze a process, the result of which was left open.



FIG. 9 TIST, *Anti-fascist Anti-monument. Temporary But Resistant*, 2022. Bologna. Courtesy of the artists.

The passers-by were offered hundred cement-like cardboard blocks to write their reflections on. The blocks symbolized the bricks to be thrown at the infamous march. After writing a political message, the participants were invited to position the blocks one onto another to construct a new *Temporary But Resistant monument*.

This action had a playful character: the instructions were presented as a comix, and the written phrases looked like scribbles people leave spontaneously on the city walls. While personalizing one's block, the inhabitants

engaged in passionate discussions with each other on their political positions and on how efficient resistance to reactionary politics could be achieved. Moreover, the citizens established dialogues and polemics through written interventions by adding their thoughts to those already left by the others or by using arrows and visual connections directly on the walls of the anti-monument. In this case, the artists provided initial tools while leaving the process to the residents, who actively constructed the anti-fascist memorial they felt was lacking in the neighborhood.

In conclusion, we will delineate the primary theoretical reflections behind the anti-monumental operation by TIST collective and make a synthetic comparison with the main features inherent in the traditional monumental practice, as traced by the scholars Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck, Ruth Fazakerley.¹⁵ The first point to address here is the Subject. As mentioned above, a traditional monument is always dedicated to the only subject, be it a single personality, an event, or an abstract idea expressed in an affirmative tone. The anti-monuments by TIST are free from any pre-fabricated sense. They offer an idea of possible usage but do not directly indicate the sense behind the handling. Inhabitants create meaning by using the device and living it through. It is a stage for minimal actions, which can be comprehended through bodily interchanges in connection with others and the urban space.

The second point refers to Form and Materials. A traditional monument needs an easily decipherable form in convention with a general taste of the specific time and place. The form should transmit power and sufficiency over the down-to-earth existence. The materials should be persistent and durable. The anti-monument, in turn, mimics familiar forms, taking inspiration from local architectural clichés and typical industrial structures. Once approached, it reveals its temporary nature and a prototype-like look. The materials are recycled and not meant to last.

The third matter is linked to Site and Location. The site for a monument is an essential part of its significance and power. Traditional monuments are often prominent, set apart from everyday space, once and forever. Their elevation and immobility guarantee the correctness and eternity of their message. The anti-monuments are on wheels. They can be easily pushed around the city. They do not belong to a specific place or community. Their provisional nature is permanent. They oppose their nomadism to the correctness of immobility.

The last issue concerns the notion of Visitor, Spectator, and User. The monuments demand from us just one sense—the sight. Most are designed to be viewed from a distance and down to up and pretend to put the spectator in awe. The anti-monument invites close, bodily encounters, transforming a visitor into a user, excluding the possibility of being a spectator,

15 Stevens, Franck and Fazakerley, "Counter-monuments."

as soon as there is no discrete object for private introspection or an artist to perform a spectacle. The anti-monument can be activated only through physical relations and social care. The emotional affinity of its users with each other is the final aim of TIST's practices.

Ultimately, we want to underline that the anti-monument project by TIST collective is a series of acts of appropriation of the public space that, for two decades, has been in drastic diminution in Italy due to the extractivist cultural politics that sees urban spaces merely as a source for investment and profit. TIST aims to renounce the celebratory aesthetics of commemoration and embellishment and to explore the humble position of a pedestal with the ultimate idea of activating social ties free from the monetary exchange or cultural policy dropped from above. While addressing the query of monumentality, TIST ascribes a temporary and open nature to the collective memory and attempts to rewrite forms, values, and experiences to trigger direct and unmediated dynamics in urban living. In the public space of our cities, remembrance is possible if it takes the form of a shared process and involves local agents rather than being consecrated to a monumental object.

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