INTERVIEWS | ARTICLE, 1000 WORDS

A Counter-Monument to Female Victims of Wartime Rape: An Interview with Edit András

BY SUSAN SNODGRASS, EDIT ANDRÁS PUBLISHED 12/07/2021

A new memorial project in Budapest, *Memory of Rape in Wartime: Women as Victims of Sexual Violence*, will commemorate female victims of wartime rape, while establishing a culture of dialogue around rape and violence in Hungarian society and the region. Initiated by the General Assembly of Budapest in January 2020 and to be completed in 2023, the project goes against the grain of the practices of the current Hungarian government's illiberal system of erecting nationalist monuments and statues without public input, through an open, democratic process. It also bucks the trend of Hungarian institutions and international representations from these institutions in the following: American, and historian and critic Edit András, who is a member of the project's Permanent Committee, discusses the project, the role of the Committee, the setting proposals, and how contemporary public memorials to collective trauma should be conceived.

Susan Snodgrass: *How and when did the memorial Memory of Rape in Wartime: Women as Victims of Sexual Violence originate?*

Edit András: The *General Assembly of Budapest*, where the parties that are in opposition to the ruling Fidesz are in majority, unanimously adopted a resolution to set up a Monument to Women Raped in War, as it was initially named, in January 2020. The project was initiated by the Mayor's Office, which adopted the unpeaceable *Sexual violence during WWII* (Budapest, Jaffa, 2018). Although it was the first comprehensive research published on the topic, it also became a kind of catalyst for a movement that already had sought to break the silence around wartime rape. The feature film The Prosecutor by Szabolcs Szász made in 1997 could not break the taboo, as its public screenings were stopped one week after the premiere. Female victims of wartime rape from the Second World War (held in participation as an expert consultant) has reached its audiences and is still available for a wider public online. Other forms have been also used to raise awareness, such as the documentary film. The first movement, which reached Hungary as well, provided a momentum by which the topic of wartime rape could much public attention. The pronounced feminist movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia may create a clearer situation in the public space of Budapest. Once public spaces were emptied out of socialist-communist monuments, the new democratic governments, mainly in the former Yugoslavia, erected a new, mostly figurative, set of monuments. In Hungary, the situation developed, creating a hybrid system. The government with the right wing Fidesz party majority, which has been ruling since 2010, reinstated pre-socialist monuments and put up ones without transparency, without open discussion, without consultation, and sometimes in exactly the wrong places. Its own interest, "Statue mania" also prepared several districts of the capital. As a result, public spaces are filled with statues and monuments that are neither chronologically aligned, nor thematically and stateless, "Lost" green statues on the other. A "no-vacancy" sign for monuments could be placed in Budapest, especially on the Pest side of the city. The Municipality left an urgent need for serious discussion, debate and research to return to clear and transparent processes, competition, and professional expertise. As a proprietary phase, the Municipality initiated a discussion on the topic of monuments series about the recent state of affairs of public spaces in the online art journal Artpolitik. Some professionals went as far as arguing for a total statue embargo. That was the moment when a Permanent Committee of Experts was set up in order to take up the task of facilitating the process.

SS: There are several individuals and institutional partners all working to realize this project, including a jury who will review proposals. Can you talk more about the process for selecting an artist or artists whose work will speak to issues of personal trauma, remembrance and reconciliation in a transnational context?

EA: There are two institutions involved in the project, the Budapest History Museum (BHM) and the Budapest City Archive (BCA). Both belong to the Budapest Public Art Implishment the competition and jury process, while the Budapest Gallery, a branch of BHM, will organize an exhibition of the models of the shortlisted proposals. At the time of the inauguration of the future monument, a comprehensive exhibition will be shown at the Kiscelli Museum, another branch of BHM, with a twofold agenda to provide an overview of the visual representations of violence, and to present a comprehensive history of local practices surrounding monuments. The BCA hosted lectures and runs the website, as well as collects documents and archival materials.[1] The advisory panel extends the scope of the committee with the perspectives of the city's architects and landscape architects, representatives of civil organizations, artists, and historians.

We initiated an international open call with the deadline of which was October 15, 2021; thirty-three applications were submitted The jury members will review all the bilingual proposals, this will be followed by an online forum to discuss the proposals and to invite the artists to develop their proposals. The final stage in the process selecting the proposition to be realized – will preferably be a face-to-face onsite meeting in Budapest. The jury has two international members – James E. Young, prominent American scholar of memory and memorialization and Serbian artist Milica Tomić – and the Hungarian members come from different fields of study, bringing different perspectives to the meeting. I am the vice-civil member of the jury. We have selected from eleven candidates, after reviewing their motivation letters.

SS: In the statement, it is written that women who were victims during the Second World War in the Hungarian Kingdom of Hungary, and women who were victims of rape from sexually abused during wartime in the contemporary Hungarian women or female victims throughout Eastern Europe?

EA: It is always major dilemma of memorialization. So when is it to be decided, and how widely the victimhood is to be understood. In our case, the starting point was the aim of giving recognition to the memory of the victims of rape during WWII, which is being is associated with Soviet soldiers raping Hungarian women. However, that interpretation would not only fall into the trap of nationalism, to blame the enemy and heroize our own, but also the only part of the historical truth. The research made it clear that there were also German soldiers among the sexual predators during WWII, but that women on the other side of the front suffered sexual atrocities committed by Hungarian soldiers as well. Michael Mitchell's documentary film about Soviet soldiers that nurses sexual violence in the form of raping mothers and daughters of the enemy as a tool for inflicting final damage on the enemy through deliberate and premeditated degradation. As such, sexual violence against women is part of all wars. That is why during the preparatory procedure we changed the name of the project to *Memory of Rape in Wartime: Women as Victims of Sexual Violence*.

One might say that WWII is a distant past event, and although the victims are no longer among us their memory still haunts us. The victimhood of women who were raped during the Second World War is conceptualized in our memory culture – this is a silenced, hidden part of history. However, genocide in Srebrenica and the mass rape of Muslim women happened in recent years, and there are still victims who are still alive and they are they do not wish to expose themselves. Due to the nature of rape, it is still a taboo subject for public discussion, with shame on the victim and the perpetrator still operating in many societies. Furthermore, it is not possible to designate a specific place or certain neighborhood where the crime could be connected.

SS: Has a site (or sites) been chosen for the monument? And when will it be unveiled?

EA: The BHM together with the Municipality of Budapest is in charge of designating possible sites for the memorial. Budapest is divided into districts, and there are territories in the capital that are under the control of the Municipality, while others belong to the districts. The Municipality can offer places that fall within its authority. Five places were recommended to the artists to plan a public work. All of them are located on the Buda side of the Danube. And as I stated before, the Pest side is already overcrowded with statues, memorials, and monuments; there is almost no vacancy for new public works there. Still, there is a possibility for the artists to choose a site other than the places offered by the committee, but they have to argue for their choice. It may be obtained for this purpose. The places that were offered are all well-researched, some of them are historically loaded sites. The opening is planned in spring 2023.

SS: Other components of this memorial include a library of texts, recorded talks and other resources related to war and human violence, as well as a space for personal stories and archival materials. Where will this material live once the memorial has been completed?

EA: The project website [1] will still be live after the memorial is completed, for a minimum of a few years. Later, all the material will be preserved in the Budapest City Archive and available for those who are interested.

SS: This project seems quite unique as there are very few monuments to women, particularly those addressing the trauma of sexual violence. One example that comes to mind is Dorothy Salcedo's Fragmento (2012), a monument site to female victims of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the Colombian guerrilla group FARC. Or perhaps, Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial (2005), a literary work made of concrete, with monuments that commemorate uncomfortable, often invisible histories – victims versus heroes. What commemorative practices and models are you looking at?

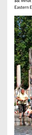
Tamás Ujvári, The Weeping Mouse, multimedia installation and workshop, 1989 – ongoing, image courtesy artist and Ludwig Museum – Budapest

EA: As we were aware that there is a huge gap between how people generally consider public monuments and the contemporary art practice of monuments and memorials, our lecture series included an international part with curators and function museums in the 19th century, the transformation of Trinity square, and how into the visual language of nationalism, and the use of monuments by the Soviet regime for socialist realism. Contemporary practices were also introduced and a lecture was dedicated to Holocaust memorials. In order to show the wide variety of memorialization of these victims, we invited speakers from Germany, Switzerland, the United States, Uganda and Kosovo that were dedicated to sexual violence against women, whether they were related to a traditional form (sculpture, statues from around the world) or used the language of contemporary art in accordance with what we consider relevant public art in today's times. We organized a conference in May 2021 titled Contemporary Monuments (2021) by Sanja Iveković, who generously allowed us to use pictures from her Women House series (1998 – ongoing), which is a monument to the victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia. Other examples include Irena Haidar's Luminport (1992) and her Untitled (1996) ephemeral memorial work screened onto the Monument of Bethlen of Nations. Lysing that contributed to the Venice Biennale, and Tamás Ujvári's interactive sculpture with the nation state. In the open call we asked for the "production of a feasible work of art that employs up-to-date contemporary language and is based on international context." The work would prefer a work of permanent public art, but ephemeral works may also be considered."

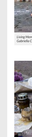
SS: Given the rather complicated history of women's monuments in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, many of which were either toppled or removed to outdoor religious museums (such as Budapest's Statue Park) after 1989, how will the project avoid the pitfalls of top-down and monumentalist approaches to this history?

EA: The whole problematics of socialist monuments is gone with the wind, at least for now; their memory has literally been buried, as well as the objects themselves, by the right-wing populist, illiberal Orbán regime. The program of the Fidesz party that has remained in office for the past ten years first Orbán government was in power between 1998-2002, followed by a socialist liberal period, aimed at "real political transformation." The goal was to remove the "communist relics" – statues, plaques, and monuments commemorating the international thinking – replacing it with a new elite representing a traditional, conservative, Christian, and national agenda to the public space, and to reinterpret iconography and national "glories" in which art and culture were to play a crucial role. A full-scale attack was carried out on the cultural sector. Step by step, the cultural sphere and its institutions were dismantled and transformed into a government propaganda machine, alternative institutions were established and stuffed with huge subsidies. Since 2010, cultural politics has been replaced with identity politics, which has turned the public space.

The last remaining socialist monument, Monument for Soviet Heroes, is dedicated to the Great Patriotic War and to those Soviet soldiers who died in the liberation of Hungary from the occupation of Nazi Germany and the Red Fascism Square due to diplomatic reasons. By erecting the infamous monument *Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation* on the square in 2014, the regime tilted back the balance with one stone. The monument, erected without any competition or public consensus, did not simply visualize the core political statement of Fidesz but also converted the Hungarian nation into victims. The Holocaust, which was forgotten, inserted into the Constitution and introduced by the new Fidesz majority parliament called "Basic Law." Hungary lost its sovereign as a result of the occupation of the country. First by the Nazis, second by the Soviets. The symbolic politics of Freedom Square is in line with this rhetoric; thus the *Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation* transformed the Hungarian Nation into victims. The monument's iconography is made up of an "conceptual crosscut." Even those public monuments were designated enemies of the nationalist symbolic politics and had their fate sealed, the socialist realist monuments. The memory of the socialist past, together with the socialist vision of modernity, had to be erased completely and the public space had to be transformed according to the historical conception with the double victimhood of the country.



Lóránd Hegyi, personal photo placed in front of the *Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation*, Freedom Square, Budapest, 2014. Photo: László Csonka



Lóránd Hegyi, personal photo placed in front of the *Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation*, Freedom Square, Budapest, 2014. Photo: László Csonka

EA: The best counter-monument in the region is the Living Memorial (2014), a reaction and response to the *Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation*. It was actually initiated by artists Csaba Nemes and Szabolcs Rozsíly, among others, which is often forgotten. It is it has been taken over by historians and activists, it generated public debate about the role of Hungary in the Holocaust, the responsibility for which is totally denied in official history. People placed personal photos and photos into the monument, and hundreds of photos are still going on. Otherwise, parallel to the monopolization of the public space, contemporary artists were crowded out. The European project Private Nationalism (2013-16) initiated by Hungarian artist Erika Szita and which I also participated as a theoretician and curator, spawned lots of critical works addressing issues of nationalism, and it was the first exhibition in my country to do so. The exhibition was on during the second term of the Fidesz government and was silenced in the official media. The political and cultural climate changed so much in favor of the new conservative elite that I doubt the Private Nationalism exhibition could be shown today. One can barely find artists who address political issues; the contemporary art scene became lightweight apolitical.

Original Conceptual, *Personal Inspiration*, part of Private Nationalism, Budapest. Installation view of the exhibition with works by Hanna Gill, Gábor Gróhalmi, Mariann Kovács, Erika Szita, 2013. Photo: Kristóf Csillag

As for the planned memorial, it is too early to predict how it will function or its reception. In Hungary's current society, the authoritarian regime promotes a Christian-conservative agenda and "gender ideology" is conceived as a threat to this identity and family model, so much so that even the word "gender" is banned from the vocabulary. Likewise, Parliament has refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, the first international instrument for combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the country's most recent anti-LGBTQ law formulates discriminatory restrictions against sexual minorities. Thus, the very existence of a memorial dedicated to women raped during war is a strong statement in that framework. Nevertheless, it most probably will generate debates and will make waves in the stagnant water of memory culture, history, and public art in Hungary.

SS: You once wrote, "In the urgent need of people's memory, of public narratives, of public participation in society-wide as opposed to statues and the public sphere being used and abused in the hands of political forces, artists could serve as agents of reconciliation and healing." Can you expand on that, particularly within the context of *Memory of Rape in Wartime: Women as Victims of Sexual Violence*?

EA: There are two different ways to initiate monuments and memorials, and both can be legitimate: they can be initiated either from above or from below. The former is the "top-down approach, which can be fast, but it is strongly connected to the sensitive issues of the crisis that it is extremely difficult for women to even talk about. The latter is a bottom-up approach, which is a long process that requires patience and trust-building. Artists are well-equipped to deal with the sensitive issues of the crisis and to open a psychological space for artists to help society cope with this memory. It is emphasized in the call that the goal is to "create an opportunity for participation, reflecting on historical and personal tragedies as well as the suppressed trauma of the Hungarian society, and to initiate and spatial arrangement, thereby facilitating coping with the trauma on the level of the individual and the society."

I strongly believe that in our turbulent and troubled times, artists are the agents not just of reconciliation and social healing but of showing a way out of the dominant crisis. This is exactly the reason why I accepted taking part in this time-consuming and strenuous project. I do hope the result of the competition will justify this belief.

This interview took place via e-mail in August 2021. It has been edited for length and clarity.

This article is part of the Special Issue Contemporary Approaches to Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe. You can find links to the other articles in the special issue below:

- Special Issue: Contemporary Approaches to Monuments in Central and Eastern Europe
- ETO TE NENA – A Living Monument: An Interview with Aida Salkić
- Chronic, A Time Based Monument to Resistance (1997) Interview: A Conversation with Lateef Tunmamby
- A Counter-Monument to Female Victims of Wartime Rape: An Interview with Edit András
- From Rags to Monuments: Textile Memorialization
- Invocation Trilogy – A Conversation on Monumentality, Language, and the Past with Miška Mundić and Kuba Dorabiałski
- Realtime Monument: Interview with Mladen Miljanović
- The Grave is Better Than Not Remembered
- A Memorial That Neither Victims nor Perpetrators Want but is Needed: An Interview with Stana Nikolić

Susan Snodgrass

Susan Snodgrass [1] is a Chicago-based critic and editor of ARTMagazine Online. Much of her writing is devoted to alternative models of contemporary practice and activating cultural memory was genesis of a project on contemporary art in former Eastern Europe. She is a 2020 recipient of a Croatian Copyright Agency Award for her essay "Ante Topić Mimica: Sculpting Time" (2019). Her essays have appeared in Sculpture Magazine, Hyperallergic, Sculpture, and elsewhere. She is the 2019 Fischer Lecturer at Northern Illinois University. She has written for, has written for both print and online publications for over 30 years, most notably for Art in America for which she was a corresponding critic, as well as Frieze, Sculpture, and Hyperallergic. Her book Inside the Inside Out: Notes from the Inside Out Design of Art Spaces was published by Hall Letter Press in 2015.

Edit András

Edit András is a Hungarian art historian, living and working in Budapest. She holds a PhD in art history from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Art History, Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Budapest), and a Visiting Professor in the History Department at Central European University (Budapest). She has published in English, Hungarian, Serbian, and Croatian, and her essays have been translated into Russian, Polish, and Romanian. Her recent publications include a book chapter in Gen Central Europe, supported by the Getty Foundation as part of its Connecting Art Histories initiative, and a book chapter in Gender Violence in Transition Societies (Palgrave, 2020). Her curatorial projects have an produced and/or supported concepts of unique modern and contemporary art greater issues, such engagement with art, critical theories, post socialism, conflict, and nationalism in the region. András has published numerous essays in collected volumes, catalogs, and professional journals, including Tate, Iaks, Third Text, springer, As a editor of the anthology Transitional Models from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009 (Budapest, 2009).

FOOTNOTES

1. The participating institutions are Hungarian Institute for Human Resources (BHM) and Iroko Association (BCA) in the proposal to award, which is a non-profit organization that aims to promote the development of the Roma people in the fields of education, employment, the workforce, and housing. Iroko Association and Budapest Gallery (BG) are responsible for the implementation of the project. Source: Concerned Society Iroko, 6. 1996. The Women's House project is an international collaboration devoted to violence against women in conflicts and post-conflict situations, and to the reconstruction of the lives of victims. The project includes a permanent exhibition and conference and video screenings. The first phase of the project consists of establishing contact with a local shelter for abused women and their children, and conducting a series of workshops with the residents of the shelter. The second phase of the project, the Women's House, was an produced and implemented around the theme of the women themselves. "The resulting essays and videos, in the end, reconstructed according to the artist's concept a specific exhibition space." To date, collaborations have been made with The Autonomous House in Sarajevo, the Women's Information Center in Belgrade, the Women's Forum in Zagreb, the Women's Forum in Split, Pro Femina, Caucus in Vienna, Centre, The Center for Women and Children in Belgrade, Tara in Zenica, and Peer Cafe in Kladovo. Back