



Juozas Laivys. *Dot – Full Stop*. 2012–2017. Site-specific intervention, Vytautas Avenue, Kaunas.



PHOTO: SVETLANA BATURA

REPETITION OF SILENCE

MONUMENTS FOR A NEW TIME

by **Paulina Pukytė**

A traditional monument that is always and so obviously present with its rigid didactic form could be likened to an uninterrupted sound that, after a while, becomes unperceivable because of the lack of silence. To become a message, sound needs to be interrupted with repetition of silence. What does a monument need to become a message, a keeper and transmitter of living memory that “returns the burden of memory to those who come looking for it” (James E. Young)? Perhaps it needs an interruption of presence or repetition of absence.

One way to regard the state of a nation is through its monuments. After restoring its independence, Lithuania rebuilt all the monuments that the Soviets had destroyed, and erected many new ones, but of the same pre-World War II form and content. However, after “putting things right” in this sense, do we find ourselves back at square one? We had hopes for new monuments to become more relevant and diverse, and for the remaining ideologically dated or controversial public sculptures

to be re-contextualized and given new meanings. But, with rare exceptions, in three decades of independence this didn’t really happen. On the contrary, commemoration discourse in Lithuania seems to be experiencing a regression – we witness a growing urge to erect more and more traditionally figurative bronze national heroes, and there are calls to memorialize freedom by directly adopting imperial and totalitarian tradition, while the darkest events of our 20th century history and their victims in many cases still remain without acknowledgement and adequate commemorative markers. Furthermore, in recent years we have seen a sharp rise in demands to get rid of the few remaining specimens of the Soviet sculptural heritage.

In 2017 I curated a public space exhibition “There And Not There: (Im)possibility of a monument” in Kaunas. The exhibition questioned traditional monuments and their ability to speak to us today, as well as the populist practice of removing/erecting prevalent in the memory discourse of public space in Lithuania; it asked how to remember what is not there, how not to forget

what is there, how to forget, how to commemorate something we wish had not been, and, in the face of over-saturation, what monuments do we need today and why do we need them at all? And, in certain cases, are monuments even possible?

The project sought to encourage and legitimize radically new, relevant, contemporary, conceptual ideas and strategies of commemoration: monument as an intervention into the rituals of everyday life; monument that exists only when there is someone to create and perceive it at the same time; monument as a process and a constant effort; monument that exists by its absence; an unerectable and therefore indestructible monument; monument that is there and not there at the same time. *Absence versus presence* was its main paradigm.

When we look at our monuments, why is there so much presence and, at the same time, so much absence? Or is there not enough presence and not enough absence? Or is there too much presence and not enough absence? Or is there not enough presence and too much absence?

And what can we do about this (dis)balance?

For the exhibition I invited 15 international and local artists to explore Kaunas (the second largest city in Lithuania), together with me, through *presence* and *absence* of its monuments. We created 23 site-specific installations and interventions in public spaces of the city: we looked back at the removed monuments, reconsidered the existing ones, searched for the missing ones, and imagined future monuments.

LITHUANIAN ARTIST Juozas Laivys placed his *Dot – Full Stop* in the spot where a monument to a Lithuanian Soviet leader once stood (and was removed in 1990). The former presence of a monument here is still implied by the architecture of this public space, even if the memory of which leader of the bygone era stood here is fading. Such an obvious absence today becomes a magnet for new “monumental” ideas for bronze national heroes (either on horseback or on foot) or kitschy, municipality generated public “art”. By drawing his *Dot* (originally created for Minsk, but not accepted there) in this place, and thus creating an artwork that is present and absent at the same time, Juozas Laivys attempted to put a full stop in a never-ending sentence of re-moving-re-erecting of monuments. Thus, at least for a while, this public space was “taken” and therefore free of propaganda, ideological and physical clutter.

JAPANESE ARTIST Tatzu Nishi employed an opposite strategy. Reinterpreting perhaps the most present of all monuments in Kaunas – the Freedom Statue – he made it temporarily absent. He teleported it from a public to a private space and from the present to the past, by building a Soviet-time kitchen around it: in the years of Soviet occupation freedom was talked about only in private, around the kitchen table. The *Freedom Monument* in Kaunas – a symbol of independent Lithuania and one of the first monumental sculptures of the nation state – was erected in 1928 (sculptor Juozas Zikaras) and demolished in 1950 by the order of the Soviet government (the bronze angel survived, hidden in a museum). In 1989, with the independence movement, the



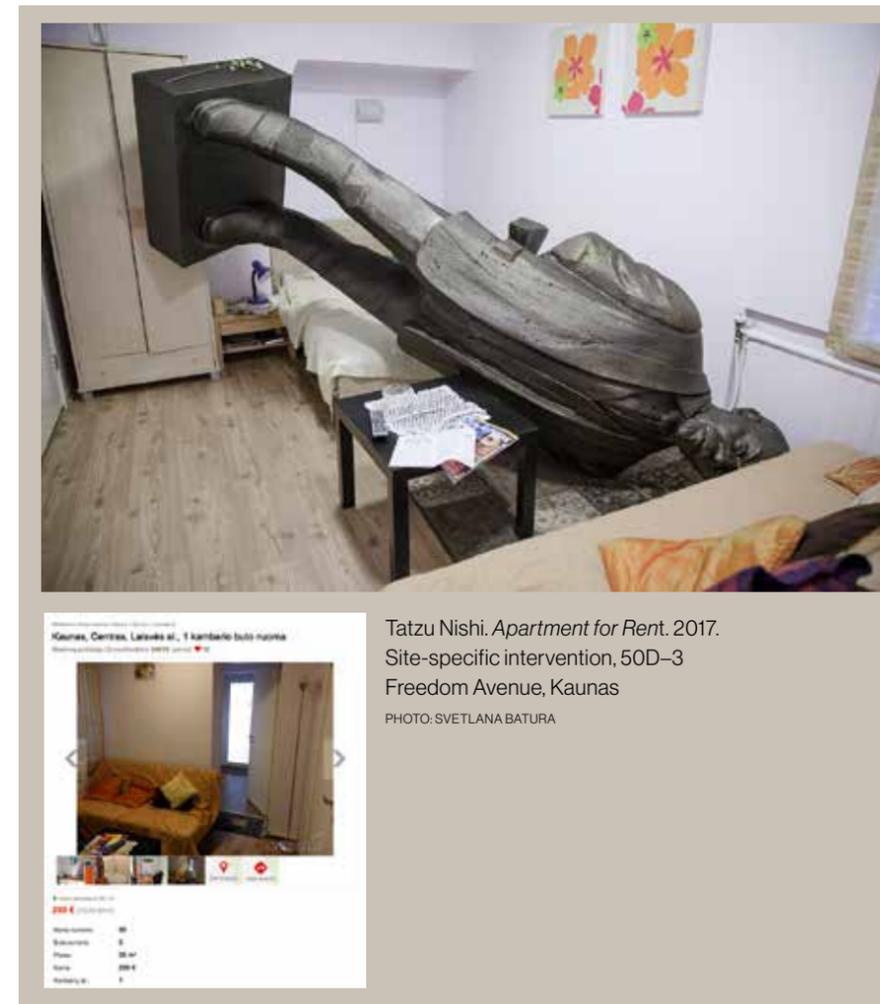
Tatzu Nishi.
Freedom. 2017.
Site-specific installation.
Vienybės a., War Museum
Garden, Kaunas.

PHOTO: REMIS SCERBAUSKAS

PHOTO: SVETLANA BATURA

monument was restored in its original location. The repetition of its absence (disappearance) again in 2017 became very controversial and upsetting for part of the Kaunas community. We received complaints about “desecration of our national values”, “mockery of Lithuanian freedom”, “destruction of everything that is dear and sacred to us” and ultimatums to dismantle the artwork. However, by interrupting its presence, the artist gave the public a different perspective of the monument, both literally and metaphorically. Those who came and saw it up close, in a painfully recognizable everyday setting on a kitchen table, will have a very different, personal connection with the Angel of Freedom now, when it has been elevated back to its unreachable glory.

AS A MIRROR PROJECT of his *Freedom* Tatzu Nishi created another installation – *Apartment For Rent*. A defunct (fallen) monument that had overwhelming presence for many years of communist rule in every town of the Soviet Union and disappeared from our squares with Independence, was returned, albeit in a com-



Tatzu Nishi. *Apartment for Rent*. 2017.
Site-specific intervention, 50D–3
Freedom Avenue, Kaunas

PHOTO: SVETLANA BATURA

pletely different context. Tatzu Nishi placed the statue of Lenin that stood in the center of Kaunas during the Soviet period in a small one-room apartment not far from the monument’s original location. So, again, the presence of a history marker was transferred from a public to a private space, but this time in the opposite direction: from the past to the present. (This case is even more complicated, as the statue has already been moved from a public-public space in the center of the city to a private-public space, i.e. a privately owned Grūtas Park.) In addition, I decided to advertise the flat with the artwork for rent. A typical real estate advertisement was placed on the internet for the duration of the show, but the installation was not visible in the offered property photos. Only upon arriving to view the flat did potential tenants see that its only room was almost completely overtaken by a statue of Lenin. Some of them asked whether it would be possible to remove “this thing”, and, after receiving a negative response, no longer wanted the apartment, while some others where not too bothered by the prospect of a fallen monument in their home and planned to “store clothes on it”. After a viewing,

every potential tenant was told that the property had just been taken by someone else (so that the installation could continue as “available for rent” for the duration of the show), but they were not told that they had stumbled into an artwork. Interestingly, none of them thought this was art, or at least none of them expressed such suspicion or enquired about such possibility.

These installations spoke of the inertia in our minds, reminded us of our inability to detach ourselves from our traumatic past of the 20th century, and, at the same time, to accept it as our own. Not to dissociate from it or to ignore it – that we often do – but to step aside from it and regard it from today’s perspective in order to be able to deal with it and to move on.

ANOTHER PART OF the exhibition pointed out the absence of Jewish life in Kaunas, where 34,000 Jews lived before the war and 30,000 of them perished in the Holocaust, and the absence of specific knowledge about many of their fates, as well as the absence of commemoration markers for them. To emphasize this absence I made up an artist, Adina. For this “unknown artist”



Adina. *Memorial Plaque to My Father*. 2017. Found object in situ: cemetery wall, iron spade. Site-specific intervention, wall across from Radvilėnų pl. 66, Kaunas.

PHOTO: PAULINA PUKYTE



Paulina Pukytė. 29 = 42. *Refusal of the Afterimage. A Monument to Jan Zwartendijk.* 2017. Site-specific intervention; sign on pavement, press release. PHOTO: SVETLANA BATURA

PHOTO: PAULINA PUKYTE

I used my mother's life story and borrowed her absent name. My mother's Jewish father disappeared somewhere in Kaunas during the Holocaust, and her name was changed to save her. She never really recovered from that. I think she wanted to be an artist, but never became one. Perhaps only Adina could have been an artist. I attributed to this absent artist an object I found *in situ* on a Jewish cemetery wall in Kaunas: a spade with which a hole in the wall had been repaired a long time ago. I thus turned it into a memorial to all the persons whose burial place or death circumstances we do not know, to those with absent grave-stones, absent names, and absent histories.

MY OTHER SITE-SPECIFIC piece to mark the absence of a monument was inspired by a strange fact that a commemorative plaque to the Righteous Among The Nations Jan Zwartendijk, a Dutch Consul in wartime Kaunas, had been installed on No. 42 Laisvės Avenue, instead of No. 29, where he actually worked saving the Jews from the Nazis by issuing them visas to Curaçao. I learned that it was because the current owner of No. 29 refused the Municipality's request to have on his building a plaque that had anything to do with Jews. Therefore 29 was substituted by 42. To show the absence of commemoration on No. 29 I put a plaque on the pavement in front of it, to where private ownership does not extend, with a number 42 and an instruction to look at it for 42 seconds and then to look up. After doing this you would normally see, for a few seconds, an afterimage of a 42 on the front wall in front of you. But in this case, you didn't: shiny iridescent tiles of the wall rejected the afterimage, echoing the rejection of the plaque by the owner of the building. A press release accompanied this piece, announcing the unveiling of a

memorial to Jan Zwartendijk on the façade of 29 Laisvės Avenue, Kaunas, Lithuania, "that will remain on this building forever as a refusal" – the absent memorial. And, when people stood in front of the building following the instruction on the pavement, they in fact performed "a minute of silence" honoring the savior of Jews.

In Kabbalistic tradition 42 is the number with which God creates the Universe.

If the Jews, running away from death, were able to dig a tunnel straight through the Earth, gravity would have taken them from Kaunas to Curaçao, a Dutch island in the Caribbean on the other side of the world, in just 42 minutes (a "gravity train effect").

"42" is the answer "to life, the universe and everything", given to the hitchhikers through the galaxy by a computer called Deep Thought after seven and a half million years' calculation.

In the Egyptian Book of the Dead there are 42 questions asked of persons making their journey through Death.

If they are able to give answers to all 42 questions, they can reach the ultimate goal of becoming a star that gives light to the Universe.

42 is the angle at which we see a rainbow.

THE "SQUARE" formerly known as Demokratų Square is in the territory of the former Kaunas Ghetto, in the Vilijampolė suburb where all the Jews from Kaunas were forced to live from July 1941 until its complete destruction in 1944. On October 28, 1941 a mass selection of the Ghetto inhabitants took place there, that



Paulina Pukytė. *At Noon In Democrats Square.* 2017. Recurring site-specific performance, duration 7 min, daily at 12 noon, for 70 days. Vilijampolė, Kaunas.

PHOTO: REMIS SCERBAUSKAS

became known as The Big Action and resulted in the extermination of 9200 Jewish men, women and children in a single day. There is no monument nor any sign there to mark this event or its victims. I decided to intervene in this disadvantaged neighborhood with something out of the ordinary, out of place, to create a monument there that is temporary yet recurring, present and absent at the same time. I wanted to reveal the great absence there – not only the absence of any commemorative marker and the absence of knowledge of what happened there, but also the absence of people who lived there – of Jews and of their language that nobody there understands anymore. So, for 10 weeks every day at noon I had a young opera singer come and sing two songs in Yiddish to the emptiness of Democrats Square. The singing was unannounced and unexplained, it just happened, every day, always at the same time. At first the local residents met this strange phenomenon with hostility: drunks outside the local supermarket mocked the singing with shouting, old ladies berated the singer for "disturbance". But, hearing the beautiful yet incomprehensible singing for many days, the passers-by started considering it, inquiring about it. Upon learning that it was to commemorate the Jews who perished, the old people often became tearful and shared their memories of what happened there: memories that had been buried deep inside and never brought up, never spoken about. We know that also because another project that I curated for this location, by British artist Jenny Kagan, involved communication with local schoolchildren, and none of them knew they were living in a former ghetto. Eventually the drunks stopped mocking the singing and even started making the sign of the cross when passing by the singer. Someone lit Catholic candles in the place where the

singer usually stood. A man with a dog came up to the singer one day and said: "I'm a drunk, but I know what happened here, and my dog now perks up his ears every day just before noon."

I believe that my artistic decision to avoid specific in-your-face explanation of this artwork (apart from the information in the special booklet for the exhibition visitors) made the local people (many of whom usually steer away from contemporary art) more curious, made them want to know, and allowed for a more intuitive, personal, emotional connection with the artwork's message. I also believe that when, after 70 days, the singing finally stopped recurring and there was silence again, there were at least some who felt that something was now missing.

The sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.

Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* ✖

Paulina Pukytė is a Lithuanian artist, writer, and curator based in London and Vilnius