The Burial and Resurrection of Kiev's Wall of Memory

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In 1981, in the same year that the Buzludhza monument was opened in Bulgaria, the Wall of Memory, a 214-metre-long funerary relief at Kiev's Baikove Cemetery, disappeared under a layer of concrete due to censorship by the Soviet Regime. It was only recently, in 2018, that a few square metres of the monumental concrete relief were uncovered again as part of the Kiev Art Week (Fig. 1), following a campaign by artist and co-creator Volodymyr Melnychenko to reinstate the work.

How did such a monumental relief come to be, and how did it end up buried and yet so close to resurrection 40 years later? The story begins in 1968, when the Soviet regime commissioned architect Avraham Miletsky to create the Memory Park crematorium in Kiev. It was to be the first facility of its kind in the country, as cremation was promoted by Russia not just as a practical alternative to burial, but also as a way of diminishing the influence of the church.[1] Attempting to create a new ritual was met with several obstacles: Not only did the Orthodox church at the time reject the idea of burning the body after death; it also carried negative connotations for many Ukrainians due to the Babi Yar massacre, where the Nazis had forced their prisoners to burn the corpses of tens of thousands of Holocaust victims.[2]

The architect had thought of the crematorium as a functional place at first, but ended up collaborating with the artists Ada Rybachuk and Volodymyr Melnychenko, who had previously taken part in a competition to create a memorial for the victims of Babi Yar. In the light of this painful collective memory, to reframe cremation in a peaceful and respectful way was a difficult and delicate undertaking. Therefore, the artists decided to create a series of various scenes that would accompany the mourners along the funeral procession and create new associations. They included mythological and religious symbolism such as Adam and Eve guarding the Earth, or the flight of Icarus into the sun, to remind mourners of the existence of unreachable places and celestial bodies.[3]

Together, Miletsky, Rybachuk and Melnychenko created a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – an integration of different fields of art and design – that combined architecture, landscape, interior design and sculpture in an ambitious whole, creating a building made of elegant white concrete shells embedded in carefully designed steps (Fig. 2). The most striking part of the ensemble was the Wall of Memory, a 214-metre-long concrete relief. Normally, such a complex relief would be made in parts in the studio and attached to the wall on site, but for cost reasons the artists worked simultaneously with the concreting and formed the steel reinforcements by hand so that everything, wall and reliefs, could be cast in one piece.[4]

Fig. 1 A part of the concrete top layer was removed in 2018, revealing the relief of a face gazing upwards

However, after seven years of painstaking work, the Soviet regime cruelly ordered the artwork to be concreted over at once. The reason was simple: The Soviet regime deemed it too far removed from the ideals of Socialist Realism. In a last act of disobedience, the artists did not pour concrete directly onto the relief, but carefully enshrined it in a protective mesh first.[5]

Being able to lift a small part of the sacrificial layer in 2018 must have been a vindicating moment for Melnychenko. However, we must question whether this was the right decision for the monument. Creating an opening may have left the relief vulnerable to water penetration, which could accelerate the hidden damage caused by a freeze-thaw cycle. In addition, as the artwork was created by more than one hand over a period of seven years, there is no guarantee that the concrete mix and application would have been homogenous. One could argue that despite Melnychenko's successful proof of concept not all parts of the Wall of Memory will survive exposure – or should even be exposed.

There is a tension between Melnychenko's desire to see his life's work resurrected, and the argument of monument conservation to preserve all layers of history and accept the Wall's fate as part of our collective memory. Compared to Buzludhza, the Wall of Memory seems to present the opposite problem: It was not celebrated by the communist party, but wholly rejected by the regime; and it is not exposed to the dangers of the weather, but is quietly awaiting liberation from its concrete veil. Yet, we can consider it dissonant heritage: It is a simultaneously powerful and painful reminder

Fig. 2 The artist Ada Rybachuk in front of the crematorium in 1976, a futuristic edifice composed of concrete shells

Fig. 3 Ada Rybachuk standing in front of a part of the Wall of Memory, the scene "Defence of the Homeland", in 1977–78

of the Soviet repression of artistic freedom.

Now, the future history of the monument stands at a crossroads. And thus, we must ask ourselves both practically and philosophically: If it were to be liberated, would its condition match Melnychenko's hopes, or has it, in fact, already deteriorated beyond any chance of recovery? If we decided to keep parts of it covered to commemorate the events that led to its current state, which parts would we choose?

One could argue that the role of the conservationist is to intervene decisively before time and weather take their toll, and to secure what exists before it is irrevocably lost. In this case, where the creator of the work desires not just preservation but liberation, the role of the conservationist might be different: not to act fast and against the clock, but to slow down the decision-making process and assist the author of the work to act carefully before he inadvertently damages his own creation and thus the heritage of future generations.

The Wall of Memory is unique in that it does not allow for any visual inspection of the actual artwork from the outside. Minor invasive methods such as taking samples would involve drilling small holes through the sacrificial layer and into the relief. This could pose the potential problem of causing damage to the artwork, especially to slender parts prone to breakage. Sampling without knowing what lies behind would therefore carry an element of risk. In this vein, drilling a small hole through only the sacrificial layer and using an endoscope – a small camera and light on a flexible stalk – would reduce this risk. However, at over 200 metres in length, to cover the entire wall could prove immensely time-consuming. So how could one get a first overall impression of the condition be built up without being able to look behind the concrete?

In this situation, non-invasive methods could be considered, similar to conducting a vertical archaeological survey before planning a dig. For example, ground-penetrating radar (GPR) is a technology that has proven successful with

concrete and helps locate rebars and areas of increased moisture.[6] As the artwork below the sacrificial layer does not have a flat surface, it could be anticipated that the signals returned from the surface of the relief would show more variation and hence be harder to decipher than scans of a flat concrete slab. To gauge the effect of the rippled surface, a model of the structure of the Wall of Memory could be scanned and used as a comparison to on-site results.

Another non-invasive option would be to use infrared thermography (IRT) equipment. Thermal images are fast and easy to take and have been used to detect damage such as delamination, cracks and voids in concrete by measuring the temperature difference between the intact concrete and the air pocket where the damage is located. Normally, it is used on heated buildings but can produce decent results on unheated outdoor surfaces on a day with a large temperature discrepancy between noon and night.[7] Nonetheless, IRT is more suited to shallow detection and might only produce diffuse results beyond the sacrificial layer. Additionally, the thermal picture could be influenced by the varying thicknesses of the air layer due to the projections of the relief. However, even if it corresponded to the outline of the artwork and showed no damages, it would provide useful information as to the position of the different scenes. Furthermore, any method that provides results in a safe way is worth trying to reduce the risk of irrevocably destroying the artwork.

Based on these considerations, what could be the next steps for the Wall of Memory? Firstly, no further uncovering of the monument should be attempted until all other options for assessment have been exhausted in the order of non-invasiveness, from visual inspection and to-scale mapping, to IRT and GPR, and finally endoscopic inspection and sampling. Additionally, if not already done, a concept for protecting and draining the opening created in 2018 should be developed and implemented to assess and slow down the

potential damage caused when part of the relief is exposed to the elements. These steps would not only be in the best interest of the monument, but hopefully also in the interest of Melnychenko to protect his legacy for the future. Only then can the question whether to uncover the monument or parts of it even be debated. Overall, slowing down and investigating the monument first would serve both sides of the argument by tempering hurry with patience, balancing the known with the unknown, and supporting the preservation of the Wall of Memory by giving due consideration to all possibilities.

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Credits

Fig. 1: Arthur House
Figs. 2 and 3: Archive, UU (Ukrainian Unofficial)

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[1]   Malyševa and Ammer, Tod in Rot, 2017, pp. 437–445.
[2]   Bykov, Burlaka and Radynski, Memory Park, 2014.
[3]   Gorova, Wall of Memory, 2018, p. 122f.
[4]   Rybachuk, Arhitektura i Ritual, 1973, pp. 17–21.
[5]   Gorova, Wall of Memory, 2018, p. 124f.
[6]   Chaban, Deiana and Tornari, Wall of Mosaics, 2020.
[7]   Janku, Brezina and Grošek, Infrared Thermography, 2017, p. 68.