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**HEROES ON PEDESTALS AND “HEROINES OF OUR TIME”
 AT THE WOMAN FIGHTER PARK.
 CONFLICTING FORMS OF COMMEMORATION AND VISIBILITY IN SKOPJE.**

Abstract: During the past decade, the urban regeneration project Skopje 2014 imposed significant changes on the city center and extensively reconstructed cultural heritage. Moreover, the project established—or reinforced—a gendered concept of national identity, according to which women were required to reproduce and mother the nation primarily. This text focuses on the negotiation between official and unofficial heritage, memory, and visibility in the past ten years in Skopje. It follows female and LGBTQIA actors as they engage in convergences and juxtapositions with official, alternative, or subversive artifacts of heritage and public spaces ascribed with non-inclusive meanings. In order to do this, the text takes the readers through public spaces in Skopje, starting from the Northern bank of Vardar and continuing to the Woman Fighter Park, which, despite its name, currently hosts sculptures honoring mostly male heroes. In continuation, it takes readers to a peculiar living room ornamented with portraits of contemporary heroines. Finally, with some additional input from authoritarian monumental painting, it recognizes the power of painting to enchant, commemorate and glorify, and finds that gallery painting can extend threads to public space. It thus returns to the park accompanied by a double portrait to examine artist-activist practices to a socialist monument. In the end, it joins the first Pride Parade in Skopje, under the gaze of the masculine sculptures in the park.

Keywords: Skopje 2014, public space, monuments, activism, feminism, Žena Borec Park, painting, art, memory

The first walk in Skopje: encountering a painter and a gendered revamp project

I visited Skopje for the first time in 2014, knowing very little about the Macedonian capital. I left my things at a youth hostel near the brutalist train and bus station and started wandering towards the city center. I crossed wide streets with equally wide sidewalks, small green areas, old one or two-story houses with gardens, and I could see several high-rise residential and office buildings in the distance. A few minutes after encountering the Vardar, the landscape changed dramatically. Cranes, scaffoldings, piles of construction materials, and buildings and monuments of a historicist, eclecticist, yet post-

modernist character (Koteska 2011) marked my entrance to the center, where Skopje 2014 was in total development.

The Skopje 2014 urban regeneration project was developed, financed, and executed between about 2009 and 2016 by the then Macedonian government.¹ Through a re-branding of the nation that consisted of intensively concealing undesirable heritage and inventing new, the project attempted to attract capital influx in a globalized neoliberal world and address the local and international challenges the country has faced since independence.² (Dimova 2013, 2019, Graan 2013, Janev 2015, 2017, Risteski 2016, 2018, Stefoska, and Stojanov 2017). Skopje 2014 was met with much controversy and resistance (see: Gelevski 2010, 2010a, 2010b, Teodosievski 2017, Vilić 2009, 2015). Local and international commentators and researchers have expressed their concerns, pointing out that, among other things³, it generated—or further intensified existing—ethnic, class, and gender divisions (Ahmeti 2011, Dimova 2019, Graan 2013, Kolozova et al. 2013, Koteska 2011, Risteski 2016, Rogoś 2019, Véron 2015). Skopje 2014 was widely perceived as a violent action against the city and its citizens. The imposed architecture was seen as “architor-ture” (Gelevski 2010b). In contrast, residents protested against the “rape” of Skopje [ne go siluvajte Skopje], or else the “violent usurpation” and “physical injury” of their city, but also its “sexualization” according to the gendered understanding of national identity and masculinist values promoted by the project (Véron 2017, 1452).

On that very first walk in Skopje, I found myself wandering among dozens of monuments dedicated to personalities that were unknown to me at the time. Among them, the statue of a painter at the Northern bank of Vardar caught my attention. The painter's long hair was waving back as he took a decisive step forward with the pallet in his hand,

1 Massive transformations were imposed on the city, redefining Skopje's symbolic landscape and social memory. The new monuments were invested with new rituals and meanings. The project formed part of an “antiquization” process which, on the one hand, envisaged historical continuity with the ancient Macedonian past and, on the other, proposed a historicist aesthetic articulation of the European dream (Mattioli 2014, Risteski 2016, Vangeli 2011). In continuation with (and as an intensification of) the post-socialist ethnocentric turn, the project adopted an eclectic approach to history, art, and architecture. It implemented policies of purity that concealed the city's both socialist and Islamic heritage, directing the pedestrians' gaze and steps away (Ahmeti 2011, Amygdalou 2018, Janev 2015, Koteska 2011, Skoulariki 2017, Vangeli 2011).

2 Skopje 2014 was in line with the post-socialist valorization of what is considered to be “European” [it is important to note that different actors have different understandings of Europeaness, that, in turn, lead to different “regimes of aesthetics” and different politics (Mattioli 2014)]. What is more, the project was an attempt to undermine the Greek monopoly of the Macedonian past and response to Greece's blocking the country's international recognition after independence, in a period of re-intensification of the “Macedonian Question.” Lastly, Skopje 2014 attempted to address the challenges that arise from North Macedonia's multiethnic composition; however, it did so in a way that reconfirmed the existing power relations, which further intensified inter-ethnic frictions (Dimova 2013, Graan 2013).

3 To name some of these things: the project's disproportionate cost, which heavily burdened the country's economy; many locals' understanding of it as an imposed foreign body on the city and the national narrative; its generally negative international reception; as well as the possible part Skopje 2014 played in obstructing the country's admission to the EU (Graan 2013, Kolozova et al. 2013).

a posture that indicated passion and (e)motion. My first thought was to set up my camera at the steps of an adjacent building and pose face to face with the man, copying his self-confident posture [Fig. 1]. As I walked away, I began to wonder what had led me to take that particular photograph in front of a statue of someone I did not know, in a city whose history and culture I was also very much unaware of.

One of my first thoughts was that my impulse might have derived from my recent decision to distance myself from painting and experiment with other artistic means such as sound, performance, walking, and mapping. I saw these media as possible solutions to my need to act outside the exhibition space and engage more. In addition, I felt that these media did not carry what I then perceived as the “burdensome” heritage of painting, in the sense that they did not participate in the perpetuation of established gender roles and existing power relations to the same extent; They did not remind me of my references on the constitution and reproduction of the “male gaze” on painting canvas, for example (Mulvey 1989). They did not remind me of male painters I knew, either, who adopted the look, temperament, and attitude that I automatically attributed to that statue in Skopje. Little did I know that in a few years from that encounter, the painting would appear centrally in the field of my ethnographic research on contemporary art and public space in Skopje, as I will examine later in this text.

As I continued wandering through the center, I could increasingly sense how the city was acting upon me. My choice of that pose next to the statue was possibly motivated by the nearly complete lack of statues representing women. The only Monument commemorating a woman I eventually encountered during that first walk was a complex of sculptures dedicated to Olympia, the mother of Alexander (or to “the Mothers of Macedonia”), at the entrance of the Stara Čarsija.⁴ The complex presents four moments in the life of Olympia as a mother, thus celebrating not the queen herself or some memorable act of hers, but the mere fact that she gave birth to a great man. Thematising the concept of motherhood, the monument depicted Olympia pregnant, breastfeeding little Alexander, hugging him, and playing with him on her lap.

A park for the Woman Fighter without women⁵

I returned to Skopje for my Ph.D. research in 2018. With the Olympia complex already provoking many thoughts regarding female visibility and commemoration in public space, I visited the park dedicated to the “Woman Fighter” several times. The park is dense with sculptures and monuments. The oldest among them, which gave its name to the park itself, is an almost abstract modernist marble sculpture by Boro Mitričovski that

4 It was designed by a sculptor and professor at the Skopje School of Fine Arts, Valentina Stefanovska.

5 One of the slogans that appeared in placards during the protests against Skopje 2014 in the early 2010s read: “Park of the Woman [Fighter] without women” [Žena Park bez ženi]. What is more, columnists and commentators remarked that the “Park of the Woman (Fighter) was silently turned into Men’s Park” (Tanurov 2012).

honors the women who actively participated in and lost their lives to the national liberation struggle in Second World War. It was unveiled in 1970 by the Yugoslav government (see more at Hatjievska et al. 2021).

Ironically, in the framework of Skopje 2014, the Woman Fighter Park was “invaded” (Jana Jakimovska, personal communication, 2018)–with statues representing men.⁶ Out of the approximately twenty new sculptures installed in the park, only one honors the memory of a specific woman.⁷ The disproportionate ratio of masculine to feminine sculptures in the park is a silently violent materialization of the official Skopje 2014 narrative. What is more, female statues in Skopje primarily represent, in a generic way, values, such as maternity and victory, or trends, such as (female) posh,⁸ Led by a stereotypical masculinist understanding of sexuality and appeal. The lack of commemoration of women in the public space and sphere did not start with Skopje 2014⁹. However, the proj-

6 Among them: members of The Antifascist Assembly for the Popular Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM), the country’s first Parliament after World War II; revolutionaries who participated in the struggles for the independence from the Ottoman Empire; Pjeter Bogdani, an Albanian writer–one of the very few monuments of Skopje 2014 dedicated to an Albanian-speaking figure, after an agreement between VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, the Albanian party that participated in the governing coalition (for the negotiations between the two ethnic political parties, the participation and representation of ethnic Albanians in Skopje 2014, or their exclusion from it, as well as for the reception of and responses to the project by both the Albanian ethnic community and its political leadership see Risteski 2016, Véron 2015). The inclusion of few anti-fascist and Albanian figures in the project can be seen as a compromise that would allow VMRO-DPMNE to counter accusations of a biased approach to history. Nevertheless, not far from Bogdani’s sculpture, there is a monument featuring muscular male figures dedicated to the Macedonian Armed Forces who lost their lives in the conflict of 2001. This particular choice of a monument commemorating Macedonians that heroically fell for their country in a battle against Albanian insurgents instead of a monument emphasizing reconciliation broadens divisions between the two ethnicities (Véron 2015), especially in a battle when placed next to one of the few Albanian figures of Skopje 2014. In the Woman Fighter Park, there is also a relief dedicated to the Macedonian children that had to escape Greece during the Civil War and were never allowed to return home as well as a monument to fallen national heroes, with stylistic references to the Brandenburg Gate, featuring a robust Prometheus sculpture (for the sculptures and complexes at the Woman Fighter Park see: Risteski 2016, Skopje 2014 Uncovered n.d.).

7 Veselinka Malinska, part of the ASNOM complex.

8 As implied by the title and/or nickname “šmizla” given to sculptures representing young, sexualized women talking on the phone, chatting, and carrying shopping bags. The sculptures by Dimitar Filipovski and Aleksandar Ivanoski-Karadare were unveiled in 2009, before the official inauguration of Skopje 2014. Some of my discussants consider them as part of the project, while others do not. (Skopje 2014 Uncovered n.d.)

9 According to Suzana Milevska: “Even though during the fifty years of communist regime women gained many rights that facilitate their public presence, the transition period revealed the weakness and superficiality of [...] gender equality and brought to light many contradictions in gender relations” (Milevska 2006). For working conditions of women in the field of art, see Milevska 2013.

The lack of female representation in public space before Skopje 2014 has been addressed in Hristina Ivanoska’s artwork “Naming the Bridge.” When Ivanoska realized that street names in Skopje were mainly commemorating men, she attempted (and finally managed to) officially name a newly built

ect's not only nationalist but also gendered understanding of history, memory, national identity, and public space, takes a more radical step, silencing female participation in these fields and denying official recognition of power and knowledge to women—contrary to what the “Woman Fighter” park aspired to do during socialism. It thus reinforces the established gender hierarchy, recognizing women as good mothers and objects of desire and maintaining male dominance in the public space and sphere (see Milevska 2013, Veljanovska 2018, Véron 2015).

All the Woman Fighter Park complexes and statues, erected on massive pedestals, are realistic and oversized. They are lined up facing the nearby Parliament along the 11th of October, one of the city's busiest streets. Thus, they seem to displace both spatially and symbolically the almost abstract and smaller Monument to the “Woman Fighter,” which is located deeper in the park and surrounded by trees.

Right across the park lies the Macedonian Parliament. In 2013, the Parliament voted for changes in the Law on Termination of Pregnancy. Among the amendments that were voted for, there was a critical delay period before the operation, during which a social worker would offer (discouraging for the abortion) counseling, while pictures of the fetus and the sound of its heartbeat were presented to the pregnant woman. What is more, hefty fines would be imposed on doctors that would not follow the law.¹⁰ The importance that the VMRO-DPMNE government attributed to maternity can also be concluded from the fact that among the most expensive state advertising campaigns between 2008–2015 were those in favor of the third child and against abortion.¹¹ These policies served the then-government's intention to make women adhere to the officially promoted role of the mother, a role that, ironically again, “women fighters” have had to give up, at least for a while.¹²

Compared to Yugoslav socialist standards, in post-socialist regimes, both the officially promoted female stereotypes and reproductive policies seem to have changed. Taking into account that maternity is famously considered as a way of defending the state territory, the imposed restrictions on the access to abortion demonstrate that women are perceived as state property and reduced to the biological function of childbearing (see Athanasiou 2010, Tsagarousianou 1995, Veljanovska 2018, Zajović n. d.). Such mea-

bridge after Nakie Bajram and Rosa Plaveva, Turkish and Macedonian feminist socialists, both active in Skopje in the beginning and mid-20th century (Milevska 1998, 2006, Ivanoska 2005).

10 The amendments were removed in 2019 with a new change in the law.

11 Veljanovska 2018

12 Suzana Milevska, for example, as part of her search in Balkan photographic archives (historical, national, state, and libraries and museums in various cities across the Balkans), encountered images of women who took part in armed conflicts during the Ottoman Empire. The photographed women were in military uniforms and strapped with bullets, while guns hung from their shoulders. There were very few hints implying their gender as they had their hair short and their breasts were hidden under stiff fabrics. Regardless of why these photographs were initially taken, they have, according to Milevska, an “inevitable impact on cultural memory, filling the lack of representations of gender difference” (Milevska 2010, 109). They testify to “ambiguities and dissonances” (Milevska 2010, 103) in the ways gender was practiced in the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire and demonstrate the heterogeneity of representation even in systems that are considered strictly patriarchal.

asures, though, have been met with resistance in ex-Yugoslavian cities. In Skopje, the response to the amendments and costly state campaigns included demonstrations, legal actions, and interventions in public space with the participation of citizens and NGOs for human rights.¹³

“Heroines of Our Times” in the living room

Following the gendered narrative implied by Skopje 2014 and imposed by the Law on Termination of Pregnancy changes, the right place for women is the interior of their home. This is more or less where I found myself when I visited Jana Jakimovska's solo exhibition “Heroines of our times” at the Museum of the City of Skopje in December 2018.¹⁴ For the exhibition, the artist had portrayed women who participated in the recent years' social and feminist struggles in a place of their preference. I expected to see a typical painting exhibition, where the canvases would hang one next to the other in a white cube. However, when I entered the Museum's exhibition space, I realized with surprise that that time it exhumed a welcoming aura, contrary to both my previous experience and the discussions I had with artists and curators, most often concluding to it being “challenging” and “difficult,” due to its very long shape. For Jakimovska's exhibition, a plasterboard wall isolated and contained her installation in a limited, square area. A red carpet had been placed on the floor, and the walls were covered with stencil motifs, which gave the impression of a tapestry. Canvases featuring portraits of women were indeed hanging from the walls,¹⁵ Whereas usable chairs, coffee tables, and vases with flowers were arranged around the exhibition space [Fig. 2].¹⁶ The artist told me that she wanted the room to look like a homely space, like a future old lady's room who would have been an activist in her youth. Other women's stories like her own would be portrayed on her room's walls. However, she referred to her installation as a “warning” (Jakimovska, personal communication, 2018). The installation's warm, homely environment aims to warn “that if we do not act and place these female stories in history where they belong, they will remain in the domestic domain as most of the female history” (Veljanovska 2018). Reading these first sentences of the curatorial text while moving around the exhibition space, my initial feeling of familiarity turned—for short—into claustrophobia.

Elena Veljanoska, the exhibition's curator, juxtaposes the anonymity, invisibility, and domestic life of women's stories with the official promotion of new (masculine) heroes and the production of collective historical memory in the context of Skopje 2014.

13 For a more detailed presentation of events, see Miškovska 2016. For the legal actions taken, see: Noviot Zakon 2013

14 The exhibition, curated by Elena Velijanovska, was supported by the Municipality of Culture within the framework of the annual funding program for the arts and culture addressing local cultural practitioners.

15 A small text had been placed under each canvas with the name of the portrayed woman, where she is depicted, and why, explaining the reasons why Jakimovska considers her a “heroine.”

16 Photograph by Dragica Nikolovska (‘Heroinite Na Našeto Vreme 2018)

She refers to the intensification of such state interventions in the public space and sphere as “a new cult of heroization.” In an “aesthetic regime” (see Mattioli 2014) that produces only male heroes, Skopje 2014’s “retrograde, masculinist[...] symbolism [...] reduced the role of women to its primary biological function” (Veljanovska 2018). Although female commemoration in the city was already minimal before Skopje 2014,¹⁷ feminist struggles in terms of public visibility intensified only after the implementation of the project. Within the struggles against police brutality and the usurpation of public space in the context of Skopje 2014, a “new wave of feminism” developed (Veljanovska 2018). Jakimovska and the women she portrayed actively participate in this wave.

Back to painting: commemoration and enchantment

The works by Jakimovska I had been acquainted with when I visited her exhibition were mostly collages that incorporated writing, engraving, and painting on images, appropriated or her own. With references to the selfie, social media culture, and pop, she would comment on current topics from a feminist point of view. Indeed, the artist told me that she had not been painting for a while before the “heroines” series. Painting did not seem to be a suitable medium amidst the radical developments of the previous decade in Skopje. She felt the urge to leave the isolated space of the workshop to participate in the protests and, in other, collective forms of activism and artistic expression in the public space.¹⁸ (Jakimovska, personal communication, 2018). Among her solo works from that period is the series of mixed media self-portraits entitled “I was gonna paint but...”¹⁹ For each work, the sentence is completed with the reasons why she abstained from painting: “...but I fell in <3”, “...but it’s a riot”, “...but it is 2014”, etc. For the latter, the artist depicted herself as a nude sculpture on top of a classicist column, supposedly of monumental size (judging by the fact that she is surrounded by the sky, birds, and clouds), a reference to the oversized masculine sculptures that occupied Skopje at that time. Nevertheless, in 2019, after the uprisings in the city had scaled-down, she chose to depict her heroines through realistic painting, a medium widely used for commemoration throughout its (Western) history. Thus, painting became again a suitable means of artistic expression that would bring the “heroines” who had taken part in those struggles into the spotlight. As an artist who had also distanced herself from painting, I found this turn an inspiring field for inquiry.

When I asked Jakimovska about her criteria for selecting the specific women whose portraits she included in the exhibition, she told me that her initial list was much longer; however, the exhibition budget did not allow for more.²⁰ She pointed out that, in

17 See footnote no. 9

18 She participated, for example, in the Raspeani Skopjani activist choir and periodically in other collective projects, such as Kooperacija, a group of artists who exhibited critical art at non-institutional spaces.

19 She exhibited between 2014-15 in solo and group exhibitions in both North Macedonia and abroad, in independent spaces and state institutions.

20 As I have discussed with many artists in Skopje, applications for funding artistic and cultural

any case, the work did not pretend to be an exhausting catalog of heroines or an encyclopedic record of those who participated in the feminist and social struggles of the time. It was easier for her to engage women she was already acquainted with. For practical reasons, primarily, the first round of the portraits she plans to make as part of the “Heroines of Our Times” project were mostly friends (Jakimovska 2018 & 2021, personal communication). To my surprise, visitors criticized the selection of the portrayed women from the artists’ close circle, even though art differs from archiving or historiography—irrelevant of its possible contribution to these fields. What is more, following the developments in cultural critique, feminist studies, and post-colonial theory, artists can no longer claim universality or objectivity (if they ever did); they only speak from their standpoint, for themselves, and for the ways they relate to other people and things (see for example Foster 2002, Gouma-Peterson, and Mathews 1987, Korsmeyer, and Brand Weiser 2021). In an attempt to contextualize and understand the criticism of the work as non-inclusive, I searched for reasons in the chronic feeling of powerlessness and exclusion from decision-making experienced by many of my interlocutors in Skopje (see also: Dimova 2013). In any case, the criticism that Jakimovska’s work received provides an insight into how art acts upon its audience. As I have seen before through my work as an artist and art teacher, skillful realistic painting keeps enchanting its audiences today, generating admiration for both the person who possesses the technical skill and for the painted canvas that embodies this skill (Gell 1992). Painting still seems to resist demystification today. It is still widely considered a “noble” medium, which represents (and should represent) equally noble and essential things, people, and events.

What is more, the power of painting to record, commemorate and glorify seems, in the light of the criticism of Jakimovska’s work, to remain unchanged—even at a time when photography and video have long since replaced its documentary use. In this same light, the boundaries between art and historiography can often be perceived as blurry. In a more dynamic and open understanding of monuments, one could argue that they do not necessarily exist as constructions or arrangements in public space (Yalouri 2010). In this sense, the surface of a canvas could also be approached as a potentially monumental space.

Counterfeit art, or «Socialist Realism Without the Socialism.»²¹

The former authorities seemed familiar with the enchanting power of painting—and of monumental art in general, as I have examined in the case of the Skopje 2014 sculptures—as well as with art’s centuries-old use for commemoration and glorification purposes. In 2016, a series of realistic oil paintings of monumental dimensions adorned the walls of the newly built “Hristo Tatarčev” palace, where the party offices are still

projects selected by the Ministry of Culture often do not get the total amount applied for. Artists are often required to adjust their projects and budget accordingly.

21 From the title of the article «Macedonia’s Ruling Party Has Resuscitated Socialist Realism Without the Socialism» by Filip Stojanovski (2016)

housed today.²² Several of the paintings depict influential personalities and celebrational moments in the party's recent history [Fig. 3, Jovanovska 2016].

Artists and other commentators saw these paintings as a resurgence of the leader cult, only in post-socialist times within a nationalist agenda. They compared the style of the paintings with that of Socialist Realism, concluding that the portraits of VMRO-DPMNE were a "mutation" of the genre, "in which the realist expression is retained, but the happy worker is not" (Bogdanovski in Georgievski 2016).²³ In some of the works, citizens appear displaced to the edges of the canvas, leaving the center—and the symbolic weight—to the party leadership. I would add that the paintings are a continuation of the city's gendered rearrangement since most of the depicted people are men. Taking their criticism a step further, several commentators, as well as many of the artists I have been talking with, question the status of the VMRO-DPMNE portraits as art, as they do with the entire Skopje 2014 project (see, for example Bogdanovski in Georgievski 2016, Tahiri in Jakov Marusic 2016). It is not the purpose of this text to determine whether these portraits are art or not, and according to which theory. What is worth noticing, in my opinion, is that the non-recognition of these paintings and sculptures as art is, perhaps, a strategy for the non-recognition and discrediting of the entire regime and its values. The perception of the changes it imposed on the city as harmful to the quality of the citizens' everyday life and the country's international image was attributed mainly to the construction and the promotion of a "counterfeit" national narrative (Graan 2013) and, as it seems, through the production of equally "counterfeit" art.

Into the mainstream

What is certain is that artifacts such as these paintings in most cases acted violently upon citizens. The latter often responded with statements, protests, and art. Jakimovska, in particular, felt that painting, an artistic medium she holds dear, "was stolen and ridiculed" by the VMRO-DPMNE "propaganda portraits." For her, "Heroines of Our Time" was, among other things, an attempt to "bring some dignity" back to her medium (Jakimovska, personal communication, 2018, Veljanovska 2018). Painting has served those in power for centuries, from European royal courts of the Enlightenment to Nazi regimes. As with all artistic media, positionality is crucial: who paints, from which position, and for whom. In contrast to the government's portraits featuring mostly men, Jakimovska's exhibition portrays female "heroines" (see for example Fig. 4), excluded from official memory.

²² More paintings with historical themes were ordered in order to equip two newly built museums, part of the Skopje 2014 project, namely the new Archaeological Museum (2012) and the "Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Sovereignty and Independence, VMRO Museum, and Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime" (2011) - today and for reasons of political correctness "Museum of the Macedonian Struggle."

²³ See also: Koteska 2016, Georgievski 2016, Stojanovski 2016, Radisic 2014. For a comparison between Skopje 2014 and socialist modernism, see Dimova 2019.

What is more, she reverses not only the patriarchal content of the VMRO-DPMNE portraits but also their monumentality: her works are much smaller in size; The environments in which the women appear are those of their everyday lives; As in the rest of her works, the subjects are not idealized or beautified nor are they in the middle of some “heroic” act or glorious event. Instead, the aesthetic choices on the painted canvases sensorially shed light on motives, aspirations, and how the people and institutions engaged in them perceive and act upon the city, heritage, and public memory. Despite their differences, the stylistic choice of realistic painting, in which the characteristics of the depicted person appear, is, I think, of key importance in both the Tatarčev palace paintings and Jakimovska’s portraits. Both are made to commemorate and establish (or maintain the status of) people—or events in the case of the former government—as memorable. Judging by the number of streets, sculptures, and paintings commemorating men, it can be easily deduced that female stories are usually officially ignored, as they are deemed less significant (see also Ivanoska 2005). It was the official exclusionary policies of public commemoration that the “Heroines of Our Times” sought to address by inserting female stories “into the mainstream” (Jakimovska, personal communication, 2021) through the easily perceivable and impactful means of realistic painting.

Through this brief examination and juxtaposition of Jakimovska’s portraits and the VMRO-DPMNE canvases, an artistic means, such as painting, loses and regains its dignity, commemorates, idealizes, conceals, and glorifies individuals and governments by dealing with the issue of memory in aesthetic and political terms. I have argued that painting, although often considered an outdated medium, still bears significant symbolic capital and the (socially acquired) capacity to engage. What is more, even though the paintings I examine in this text are designed to hang at a gallery—or palace—wall, they interfere in public space, too. People and institutions who have ordered, produced, or are portrayed on both Jakimovska’s and the VMRO-DPMNE paintings have engaged with public space in Skopje: either by establishing (or contributing to the establishment of) the aesthetic regime imposed by Skopje 2014 or by participating in struggles for a city that would allow the equal inclusion of those considered lesser citizens according to the project’s value system, such as women and LGBTQIA. Following one of these paintings, I will now move from the living room back to the park.

Practices of resistance at the Woman Fighter Park

a. Convergences and continuities

Due to its location across the Parliament, the Park of the Woman Fighter is one of the most common starting or ending points for demonstrations (or counter-demonstrations) and public actions, which can last for days or months, regardless of political affiliation. During the implementation of the Skopje 2014 project, not only was the park a place for protest, but it also offered material for reflection on the position of women in North Macedonia today.

Among Jakimovska's paintings from the "Heroines of Our Times" series, I was particularly interested in the double portrait of actress Kristina Lelovac and anthropologist Jana Kocevka, who pose in front of the Monument to the Woman Fighter, where they have been particularly active, personally involved as they are with the feminist struggles in the city [Fig. 4]. Lelovac and Kocevka are founding members of Tiiiit! Inc., an organization that promotes women's rights, intellectual and cultural production, and activism. Tiiiit! Inc., was created at the beginning of 2011 as a response to female rights being under threat due to the changes in legislation I have examined earlier. In the framework of Tiiiit! Inc., and, in collaboration with other groups, they have organized and participated in actions at the Woman Fighter Park, which, despite the transformations by Skopje 2014, remains a place of female empowerment and public protest [see also the erection of an ephemeral monument to women by artist Gjorgje Jovanovic in 2014 in collaboration with Matka (A.B. 2014)].

In Jakimovska's painting, the texture and geometrical shapes of the Monument blend into the patterns from the two women's clothes. According to the artist, this was a mere aesthetic choice. Nonetheless, unwillingly or not, a strong connection between the fighters of the past and today's activists materialize on the canvas, provoking thoughts on the continuity of struggles. Connections between contemporary (anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist) struggles and those of the socialist past are common in the post-socialist regimes of the former Yugoslavia (footnote no. 25, Mattioli 2014). The efforts to silence and disguise the socialist heritage in Skopje seems to have resulted in it being recalled even more in the memory of its citizens and the public sphere.²⁴ This can be concluded not only by the selection of the particular Monument as the right place for Lelovac' and Kocevka's portrait but also from the continuation, even intensification, of feminist (and later on LGBTQIA, too) events and actions at the same place, after the announcement of Skopje 2014. Citizens preserve and activate socialist modernist heritage through public discussions, architectural publications, and exhibitions, as well as activist interventions, as I will examine next. It is not coincidental, for example, that the Macedonian Pavilion at the 2014 Venice Biennial of architecture exhibited models of Yugoslav modernist architecture from Skopje (Ana Ivanovska-Deskova, personal communication, 2018, Ivanovski 2015). The ways to connect with monuments, and the selection of which monuments to connect to, are not necessarily dictated by the authorities and official Historiography (Valour 2001). When Socialist heritage was being concealed behind historicist facades and buildings, associating with it was a form of resistance.

Lelovac's and Kocevka's portrait in front of the Monument reminded me of a video by the Raspeani Skopjani activist choir.²⁵ [Singing citizens of Skopje] that I had watched

24 See also Forty 2001 for how the removal of dozens of monuments to Lenin from their pedestals in post-Soviet Moscow intensified their recollection, respectively.

25 The practice of activist choirs, a form of resistance and an aesthetic process, is common in former Yugoslavian countries. In view of post-socialist societies' neo-liberalization and a generalized disillusionment regarding participation in decision-making after the dissolution of the federation in the 1990s, activist choirs have become a form of collective action and social disobedience that promotes collective singing as a political act, using humor and irony. They often revive, adapt, and repurpose songs from the anti-fascist or socialist musical heritage (Hofman 2020), not without a trace of nostalgia. For individuals from former Yugoslav regimes, "Yugo-nostalgia" often becomes

on YouTube at the beginning of my research. Jakimovska herself appears among the singers, as she was a regular member of the chorus. On the 8th of March, 2010—the International Women’s Day—and during a period when both the anti-abortion campaigns were on the rise, and the Skopje 2014 project had been freshly announced—the Raspeani Skopjani sang the song *Ona se budi* [1981, She Wakes Up] by Šarlo Akrobata, in front of the Monument to the Woman Fighter:

People wonder if she can think.
 People wonder if she is allowed to know.
 People are very bad as they look at her breasts.
 People are bad as they look at her tan.²⁶

For the intervention, the phrase “She has no one to tell her ‘you are mine’” [ona nema nikoga da joj kaže ti si moja] was changed to “She has no one to tell her ‘you belong to yourself’” [ti si svoja], advocating for women’s right to their own body. In the text that accompanies the video from the performance they uploaded on Social Media,²⁷ the choir explicitly links the intervention with both the anti-abortion campaigns and Skopje 2014. In the video (Plostad Sloboda 2010), the Monument to the “Woman Fighter”—a unique audience made of stone—appears in the same frame, behind the chorus. It not only functions as a background for the intervention, but it also reminds the continuity of the current action with the socialist feminist past, motivating viewers to “awaken the female fighter” inside them. Raspeani Skopjani engaged in many site-specific interventions

a “political statement,” and, according to participants in the choirs, it contributes to the shaping of common political identity (Balunovic 2020). Following the affective shift in humanities, which emphasizes the pre-, extra- and para lingual communication elements, sound has the affective capacity of “cultivating alternative modes of sociability and novel forms of political and cultural production” (Hofman 2020, 92). [Performativity and emotional charge, however, are not employed exclusively by activist choirs. Anthropologist Ljupčo Risteski refers to governmental performativity and its unambiguous formalistic and ritualistic language in the official ceremonies in the center of Skopje, activating the new monuments. Such rituals aim not only at legitimizing authority but also at cultivating a sense of solidarity and community, especially when consensus is weak (Risteski 2018, Kertzer, 1988)]. Activist choirs briefly disrupt the everyday urban routines as they appropriate public spaces to address often unintentional audiences, who become participants in the action. See also: Mattioli 2014.

In Skopje, apart from Raspeani Skopjani, more artists and groups such as Gjorgje Jovanovik and Sviracinja have used music and singing as an artistic medium to subvert raise awareness around the changes that took place in the city during the past decade (Jovanovik n.d.).

26 Ljudi se čude zar ona može da misli.
 Ljudi se čude, zar ona sme da zna.
 Ljudi su vrlo zlobni dok gledaju njene grudi.
 Ljudi su zlobni dok gledaju njen ten.

27 Apart from the in situ performances, Social Media presence was significant to Raspeani Skopjani, as their interventions in the city were augmented through their dissemination on the internet. In general, social media and blogging played a crucial role in spreading counter-information when the mainstream media only reproduced official discourse about Skopje 2014 (Çavolli 2012, Marchevska 2017, Marchevska et al. 2017).

around the city, in which the words of their songs and their choreography commented on each location. They often performed in front of monuments and buildings related to Skopje 2014, thus not consistently identifying with their surroundings. On the contrary, their ironic and humorous performances were contaminating (as per Douglas 2005) places that aspired to look glorious, clean, and eternal. They contributed to the de-glorification and the transformation of those places' meaning through their interaction with passers-by and through the wide dissemination of their videos, to which media opposing their actions contributed widely (Jakimovska, personal communication, 2018).

b. Heroes on pedestals observing from above

The inhabitants of a city imagine, appropriate and use public urban spaces in ways that may differ from the authorities' original plans. Public protest, in particular, disrupts the usual functions of urban spaces and opens possibilities for interactions that can lead to the co-production of representations, memories, and stories alternative to the one-sided and unambiguous dominant meaning officially imposed on the city, as in the case of Skopje 2014. (Athanasidou 2010, Lefebvre 1974, Véron 2017). In the Summer of 2019, the participants in the first Pride Parade to ever take place in the country met at the "Woman Fighter" Park. Jakimovska, who is also active in feminist and LGBTQIA struggles, and a multifaceted artist, was one of the key performers at the parade, as drag queen Linda Socialista (her drag name being indicative of contemporary references to socialism in the framework of art and activism that I examined earlier). Jakimovska told me that the initiation of the parade from the Woman Fighter Park was an obvious choice due to the "inclusive female energy" the park and Monument are associated with (Jakimovska 2021, personal communication). On the other hand, I arrived in the city when the park was not hosting many female protests anymore but was mainly activated by sit-ins against the name change and the Prespa Agreement. This made my experience of the place significantly different. Thus, not being able to fully associate with its "female energy", I could not help but observe the contradictions between the aesthetics of the Pride and those of the masculine sculptures that had been installed there in the past decade. The glitter, the colorful clothes, flags, and hair that flooded the Woman Fighter Park; the queer performativity of the event in general, were in striking sensorial contrast with the cis masculinity, monumentality, verticality, limited palette, as well as aspiration of timelessness irradiated by the surrounding statues.

The period when the Skopje 2014 sculptures were central in the official ideology was, at least for the time being, over. This is, after all, how the Pride Parade was safe to happen officially. Representatives from the embassies and international human rights organizations, and pride organizers from neighboring countries were present at the parade. Above all, the event had the support and presence of the social-democratic government (SDSM) and the police. However, what was performed, claimed, and celebrated at the parade is far from fully legally established (no same-sex marriage, child adoption, or commercial surrogacy are allowed, among other limitations).

What is more, a significant part of the local society is hostile. On the occasion of the first parade, "proud" heterosexual families paraded with strollers, crosses and national flags in anti-pride demonstrations. According to a participant from the cler-

gy, “our society is infected and it really requires a surgery [...] It is necessary [...] to cut off these bodies that are gangrene to our society.” (Tera TV 2019, 2’30”). Shocking as this statement may be, it attests to queer bodies consisting of a serious subversive “contaminating” threat²⁸ to dominant hetero-normative standards. On the other hand, the use of illness as a metaphor (Sontag 2002) to reproduce gender discrimination and normalization and as a possible call to violence against queer bodies points out their vulnerability and the lack of safety they still experience. However, the curatorial text of the 2019 Pride Weekend suggests exactly to “glitter one’s wounds,” reappropriating hegemonic discourses of violence and stigma “for the purposes of struggle, resistance and radical resignification and reinstitution of normative horizons” (Dimitrov 2019).

Later that day, at home, I stumbled upon an image from the parade, uploaded on Social Media by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, that powerfully summarized my experience at the Woman Fighter Park. In it, two participants exchange a smiling kiss under the seemingly panoptic gaze of an oversized masculine sculpture at the Woman Fighter Park [Fig. 5] (Skopje Pride 2019). The image has been vividly imprinted in my memory. I often wonder whether this “gaze” acts as a reminder that the patriarchal and nationalist notions conveyed by the Skopje 2014 monuments remain deeply rooted, overshadowing visibility, commemoration, and even safety of women and LGBTQIA. On the other hand, juxtapositions in public space, on a sensorial and symbolic level, such as the one accurately captured and pinpointed by the photograph, could function in a subversive way. Irrelevant if they happen deliberately or spontaneously, they could allow for the “resignification” of places of official memory. Such juxtapositions could be suggested as another form of commemoration that challenges and resists the dominant ones.

Conclusion

In this text, I have discussed specific moments of female and LGBTQIA claims to commemoration and visibility in the public space and sphere during the past decade in Skopje. I have also focused on connection and rupture with existing monuments and artifacts from the socialist and post-socialist periods. The text evolved mainly around the Woman Fighter Park; however, it also briefly visited the North bank of Vardar and the living room of a hypothetical future activist.

In a city “invaded” with monuments honoring men, it seems crucial for the individuals and groups that appear in this text to look for different ways of dealing with remembrance, visibility, and heritage. Throughout the text, I observed and discussed attempts to subvert the official (or, in some cases, the former, but still present) aesthetic and political regime; tactics and strategies for establishing new ways of dealing with existing monuments and with means of commemoration. Such interactions allow for frictions, convergences, dissonances, and associations (in both meanings of the word) to emerge that, in turn, reshape and resignify places of memory (be it actual sites in public space or the surface of a canvas) by enriching-or “contaminating” them-with new sto-

28 For glitter as a contaminating threat, see Tsilimpounidi 2020.

ries and new meanings. Monuments, after all, are under constant negotiation and usurpation. Even if they are understood as timeless, they inescapably become “the actual restlessness, fluctuation, and flexibility, which they resist” (Athanasίου 2010, 251, see also Yalourι 2010).

I would, finally, like to return to the Northern riverbank of Vardar in 2014. It was actually that particular image of a kiss in front of the monumental sculpture during the Pride Parade in Skopje [Fig. 5] that reminded me of my long-forgotten photograph face to face with the painter, whose name I have, deliberately perhaps, forgotten [Fig. 1]. With that photograph, I had spontaneously attempted a juxtaposition between my own body and a figure I had associated with a specific kind of authority I was feeling more and more critical to. Back then, I had found it meaningful to communicate through this particular pose the thoughts I was bringing with me from Athens and things I was beginning to sense in Skopje. This makes me think of how complex and multilayered are the ways one relates to monuments and heritage. Even more, given the fact that I was still a tourist in Skopje when I took the photo, let alone coming from Greece. This last one is a combination that puts this photograph on loose ground, and can possibly lead to misunderstandings. It is yet to be seen if and how I could employ this image in future thinking, making and reflecting on (subversive) public commemoration, and on positionality.

A.B. 2014. ‘(ΦΟΤΟ) Μатка Постаβι Розов Споменик Во „Жена Парк“ За Правата На Жените’. Α1он (blog). 31 May 2014. <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/foto-matka-postavi-rozov-spomениk-vo-zhena-park-za-pravata-na-zhenite/>.

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Illustrations



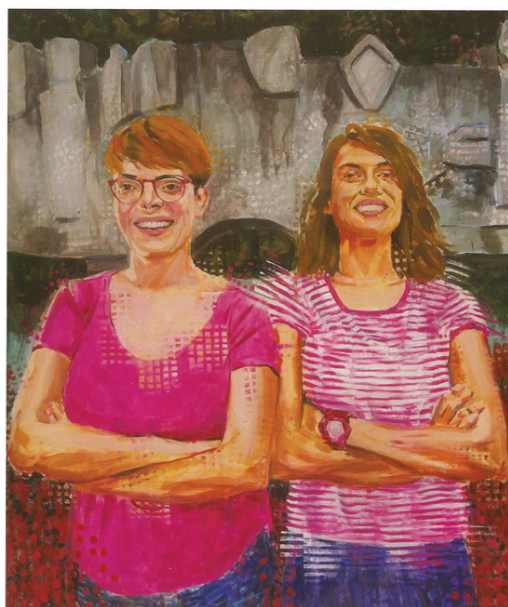
[Fig. 1]



[Fig. 2]



[Fig. 3]



Ксения и Яна, 2018
120 x 100 см
акрил на холсте
Яна Яценко

[Fig. 4 - From the exhibition catalog]



[Fig. 5]