

GÁBOR ÖSZ

Spomen

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Gábor Ösz: In search of the quiddity of a monument

The *spomenik* are monuments from a bygone era, a defunct utopia, a country that no longer exists, a country that had freed itself from the Nazis on its own and had tried to invent a new form of socialism but was torn apart by assaults from nationalistic and religious interests, and from outside powers. It had chosen to honor its dead heroes in a different way, through the melancholy of mourning rather than the celebration of victory, through utopian optimism rather than the duty of remembering, through geometric abstractions of emotion rather than sorrowful or martial figures, symbols of military pathos or iconic images of a leader. The *spomenik* are now abandoned, sometimes in ruins. Located in remote places, they are rarely visited and are sunk in indifference. Politically and culturally, they are as unique and different as the country was. The brutal modernist vocabulary of their abstract forms, which reflected the energy of history and place, has dissipated over time. The supposed "end of history" has turned them into pure sculptures devoid of their original meaning, modernist variations on romantic ruins. Their essence and substantial form and their quiddity are hardly decipherable today.

They would not be decipherable at all if Gábor Ösz had not gone looking for them¹. Simply put, his work can be said to capture the spirit of a place and translate it into photographic images whose truth lies in the creation itself. His images are not mere visual, documentary representations of a place; they incorporate into themselves the place's specificities and are built from its form and essence. In transforming the obsolete ruins of bunkers along the Atlantic Coast into *camera obscura* ("The Liquid Horizon"), he produced views of the marine skyline imbued with the history and force of these tools of surveillance and control. In photographing the normative uniformity of the Prora building ("The Prora Project"), he transposed into a single image the view of hundreds of rooms in a kind of architectural endoscopy, creating a "multitude that is always the same. This is monotony measured in bulk."²

When he discovered the *spomenik*, he immediately wondered how he could transmit the accumulated emotions of these places of remembrance, how to revitalize the flow of their energy and restore to them, if not contemporary meaning, at least an iconic dimension, and how to revive their message. For Ösz, deciding to photograph a place means first and foremost entering into communion with it. It is an almost mystical experience "related to the building itself, the circumstances, the landscape, the history. It affects you. Getting in a trance, a certain feeling that you might see something which cannot be seen otherwise."³ His need, if not to appropriate the place but at least experience a fusional relationship with it, was translated in this case into the construction of three *camerae obscurae*, each in the shape of the monument to be photographed: a cube, a pyramid and a cylinder, three basic, timeless and symbolic shapes. The space not only dictates the image but also the tool used to photograph it.

Ösz placed photosensitive paper on all the walls inside these *camerae obscurae*, blithely breaking one of the basic rules of photography: that the paper should be at right angles to the light coming from the subject. Instead, the rays of light expose not only the sheet of paper at the back of the *camera obscura*, facing the pinhole, but also the paper on the side walls. Few photographers have played with non-perpendicular light like this. Exceptions are the German Michael Wesely, better known for his temporal works, who made his "Salzburg" series (1990) with a "camera controversa" around a central void⁴, and, more pertinently, the Israeli Aïm Deüelle Lüski, who invented the concept of horizontal photography, questioning the relationship of power between the photographer and his subject⁵. The originality of Ösz's work lies in going back to the beginning, confronting what has been, ever since Ptolemy, the ongoing challenge faced by the cartographer: how to translate a three-dimensional reality into two dimensions. The view of the monument at almost 360 degrees that Ösz achieves with his *camera obscura* is presented in the form of a domino assembly of sheets of photosensitive paper: a geometric spread, a lost perspective, a disassembly. In this deconstruction of the image, we might see, to paraphrase Martin Heidegger, the emergence of unthinkable possibilities, of basic reinventions. This is a work whose complexity comes from the dialogue between the real and the unreal, the abstract and the concrete. As Ösz puts it, it's an abstraction of abstraction.

Marc Lenot, November 2017

1. Following the Belgian photographer Jan Kempnaers (see Willem Jan Neutelings, *Jan Kempnaers, Spomenik*, Amsterdam, Roma Publications, 2010; see also his website <http://www.jankempnaers.info/works/1/>) and the amateur researcher Donald Niebyl (see his website <http://www.spomenikdatabase.org/>).

2. Gábor Ösz, *Camera Architectura Manual*, Blou, Monografik, 2016, p.30, http://www.gaborosz.com/prora_text.html.

3. From the author's interview with Gábor Ösz, Paris, November 20, 2010, <http://photographie-experimentale.com/gabor-osz-mon-entretien/>.

4. See http://www.k4-galerie.de/k4_galerie/k4_galerie_kuenstler/wesely_michael/wesely.htm#werk

5. See Ariella Azoulay, *Aïm Deüelle Lüski and Horizontal Photography*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2014.