



Invisible Wounds

Negotiating Post-Traumatic Landscapes

edited by

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Something Former

A Conversation Between Goran Vodička and Vlatka Horvat

The editors of Invisible Wounds invited Goran Vodička and Vlatka Horvat to have a conversation about their different perspectives on post-traumatic landscapes. Bringing together insight and reflection from creative practice and landscape architecture, they discuss the former Yugoslavia, memory and place-making after Socialism.

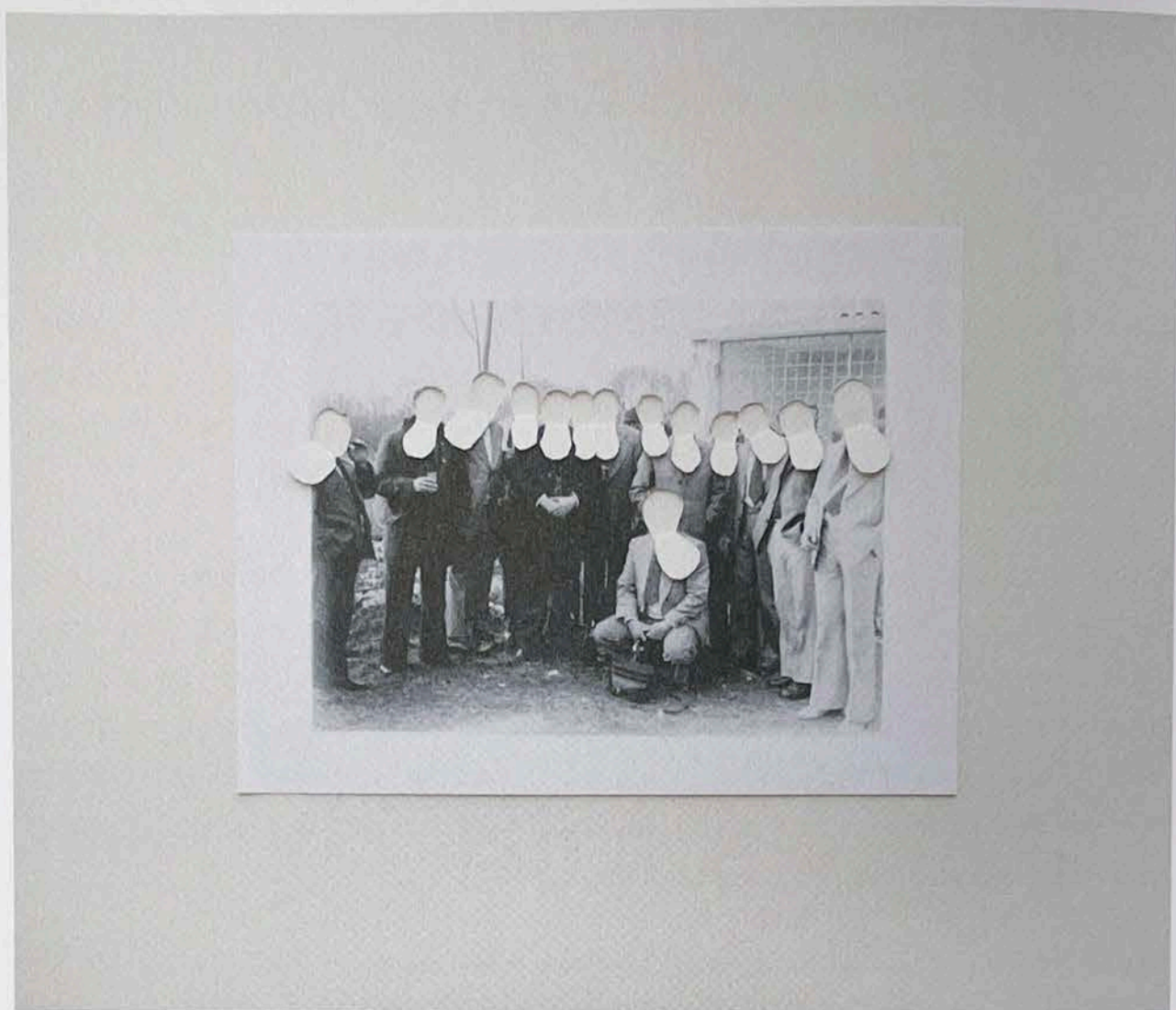
Goran Vodička: *Coming from the same country [the former Yugoslavia], originally, and being from a similar generation, I feel that I can very much relate to the series of works based on your family photo archive and the strong sentiment these evoke and the questions they raise. For instance, specifically about the endless ways of understanding our collective and personal histories and memories, the real and/or imagined ones but also the 'right' and the 'wrong' ones. How do you interpret your work in relation to Invisible Wounds? How does the notion of landscape operate within it?*

Vlatka Horvat: The series of works you're referring to – *With the Sky on Their Shoulders* (2011), *The Past Is Another Country* (2015) and *Up in Arms* (2013) – all use my family photographs as source material, featuring my parents as young adults in socialist Yugoslavia in the late 60s/early 70s, a time associated with idealism and optimism about the future.

My parents were born just after WWII, and their entire lives were framed by the Yugoslav socialist project. When the country fell apart in 1991 their lives up to that point were suddenly regarded as a colossal mistake, something they should promptly forget. Everything they believed in or worked to build became something to be disavowed, ashamed of, denied and erased. The project of building national identities in the newly independent countries that emerged out of Yugoslavia involved major historical revisionism – everyone was expected to 'adjust' their memory. But memory of course doesn't work that way; we cannot will ourselves to forget lived experience.

In my work I'm drawn to the experience of individuals caught in large, sweeping societal changes. I'm fascinated by how people on the ground navigate altered realities and contexts – of both the new states they are living in and the past ones of which they are a product. How do people make sense of themselves within these unstable and shifting frames?

Unlike our generation, our parents' generation were a bit 'too old' to adjust – too old to be learning from scratch how capitalism or the neoliberal world order work. What they did learn quickly was what it is to become disposable in a society you have worked your whole life to build. So for me these three works look back

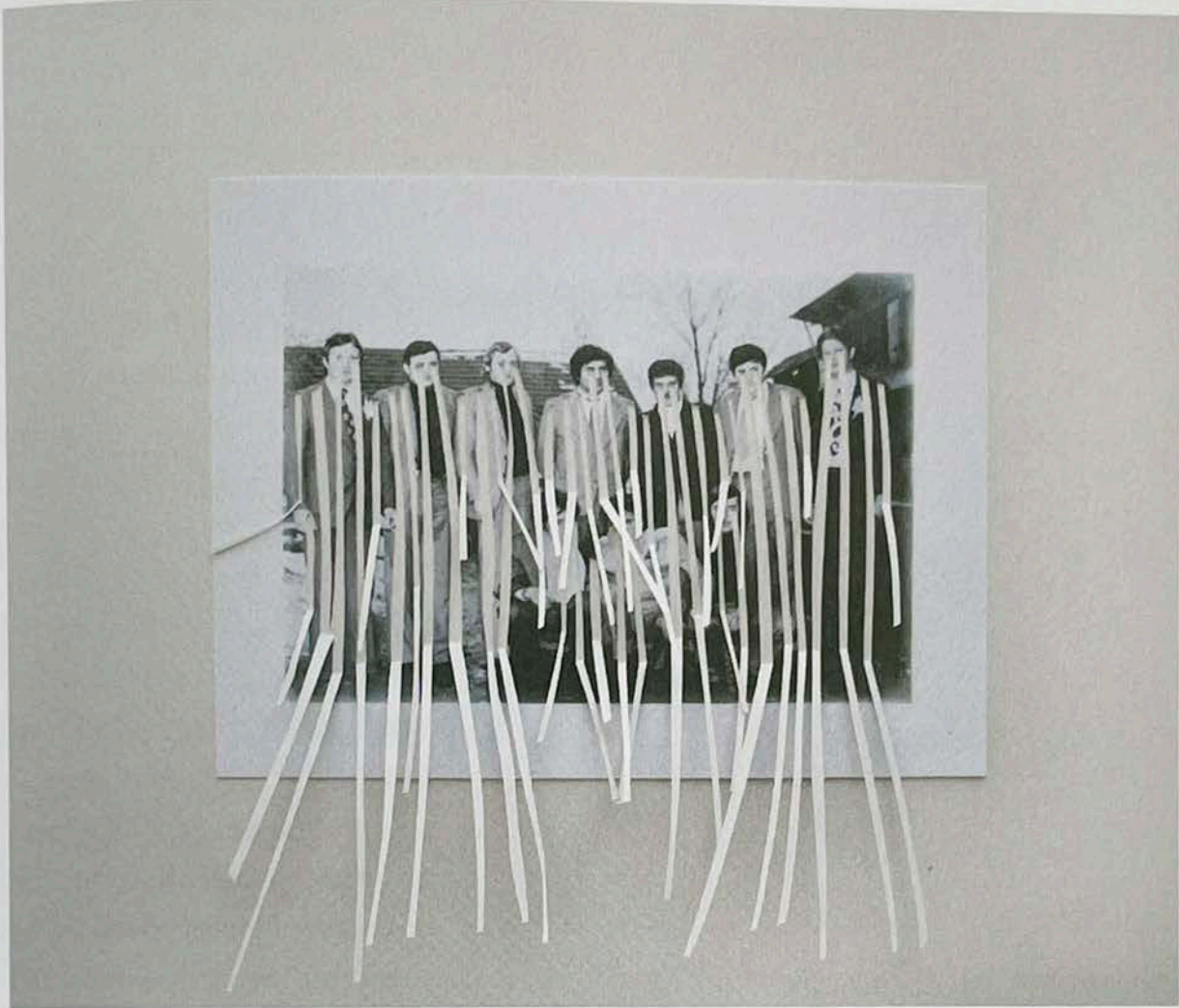


Vlatka Horvat: *With the Sky on Their Shoulders (01)*. 2011. Inkjet photo collage.

at a generation which, in the context of post-socialism, seems like a lost generation. History swallowed them up and spat them out.

When I started working on these series, I would often wonder about how you'd think of yourself if you were asked to expunge all you once thought, revered, believed in, worked for, all that you've been taught and which you taught your children. What would you do with the things you were meant to erase, but which you can only erase imperfectly, because lived experience, memory and trauma have a way of lingering and persisting in spite of conscious effort. There is no on/off switch for memory.

Most of the images in *With the Sky on Their Shoulders* feature my father, his colleagues and friends posing for the camera in different contexts and arrangements: work situations, group photo opps, leisure gatherings and sports events. I have intervened within these images in different ways: cutting out and folding down the subjects' heads, gouging out their eyes, flipping around parts of their bodies, dissecting them following the lines of the ground or the horizon, blurring the distinction between them and their surroundings. Sometimes I treat individual figures in these photographs as separate entities to be severed or discombobulated; at other times I take entire groups of figures and treat them as a single object, an

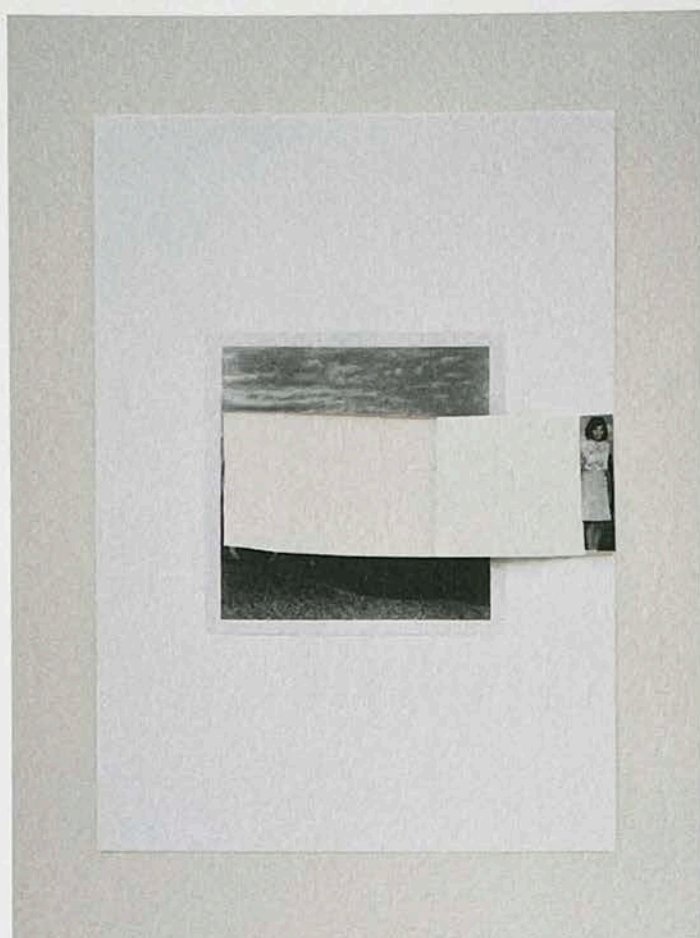


Vlatka Horvat: *With the Sky on Their Shoulders* (23). 2011. Inkjet photo collage.

amorphous blob, a stain in the landscape. Treating these groups as single objects or masses in this way subsumes and anonymises individual figures. The fact of their belonging to a group supersedes any sense of individual presence or agency they might have had in the original photographs.

By contrast, the images in *The Past Is Another Country* all depict a lone female figure, my mother, in scenes from which both the physical context and all other figures have been evacuated. Again, I use a series of cutting and folding gestures, but in more radical ways. At times, my mother's surroundings are removed, leaving her suspended in the midst of empty frames; at others, the figure is folded onto itself, or folded over the edge of the photographic image, into the margins.

Lastly, in the *Up in Arms* series, I have turned the photographs of my parents and their friends and colleagues over, so that the back side is facing up, first cutting around and then folding back the arms of the figures, making them the only visible image on the reverse side of the paper. Sometimes it seems as though the folded arms are flapping backwards in a state of being lost; other times they appear to be reaching, or being thrust back. Disembodied, without the rest of the figure to which they belong, these hands and arms strewn around on an otherwise blank white surface seem very much out of place.



Vlatka Horvat: *The Past Is Another Country (05)*.
2015. Inkjet photo collage.

Memory and making sense of the past and ourselves within it are at the heart of all these projects. The period of history I'm looking at in these works – that of socialism – is contested. Multiple versions and contradictory narratives about this time exist, and it's difficult to discern with any certainty *what actually happened*: what we did, where we were, what we thought, or felt, or wanted. We might as well have made it all up, imagined it in the first place.

In these collages, as much as drawing attention to the distorting lens of memory, to the gaps we are confronted with when we look at (any) historical material, I also want to point to the deliberate acts

of erasure, removal and revision that have become instrumental tools deployed by politicians, governments and others with a vested interest in manipulating our collective histories. Meanwhile, the holes and cuts I make in the landscape surrounding the figures and in the figures themselves invoke some of the dehumanising effects that systemic change and reframing of history can have on people.

The repeated gestures of fragmentation and dispersal I use in respect of human figures in these works serve to focus on the figures' lostness and their vulnerability. There is absurdity and humour in these acts of cutting and folding of body parts – making the figures perform contortionist acts, extending their hands to merge them with trees – but there is also profound violence in them too. In that sense, the incisions on paper very much are wounds – in physical space, in memory, on bodies and on psyches.

And, as much as the holes, openings and blank spaces in these works might be spaces for projection and re-imagining of the past, they are also, just – nothing. Not spaces of potential, but nothing. Only evidence of that which was taken away, destroyed. Forty-five years of living, loving, building, feeling, carrying, playing and working rendered invisible, as if none of it had happened. Filed under 'Something former.' History erased and future cancelled.



Vlatka Horvat: *After Tito, Tito* (01), (06). 2011.
C-Prints, mounted on Dibond. Courtesy the artist.

GV: *Your work from Tito's bunker in Konjic, After Tito, Tito is another rich and complex example of how the past continues to resonate in the landscape. It is interesting how in this underground space you actually found familiar historical objects (i.e. framed portraits of Tito) which then through your transformation raised questions about the distorted interpretation of history. How was this conceived?*

VH: In much of my work with objects, images and physical spaces I'm interested in their dissolution, in the gestures and processes of taking them apart. On the flip side, I'm often trying to place these disassembled 'former objects' into new relations with other objects, elements of the built environment or landscape, trying to see them both anew as they encounter one another.

In *After Tito, Tito*, I re-photographed portraits of Tito in his bunker in Konjic, some 30km outside of Sarajevo. The bunker is a kind of underground city, with infrastructure to support some 300 people for six months. It was built between 1953 and 1979 and was intended to be used by Tito and his circle in the event that Russia attacked Yugoslavia – a perceived threat hanging in the air ever since Tito split with Stalin in 1948.

Framed portraits of Tito hang in most rooms of the bunker and caught my eye during my initial visit there. They were the same iconic portraits that used to hang in every classroom, office, workplace, train station, and other public spaces while I was growing up in Yugoslavia in the late 70s/early 80s. In the bunker I photographed each of the portraits in situ, wherever they hung on the walls,

shooting them through the glass of the frame. At that time I didn't think that I was making a work series; I was merely wanting to capture the framed photographs, as by that time – 2011 – they were an unusual sight. You could no longer find portraits of Tito anywhere. They had all been disposed of – added to the trash heap of history.

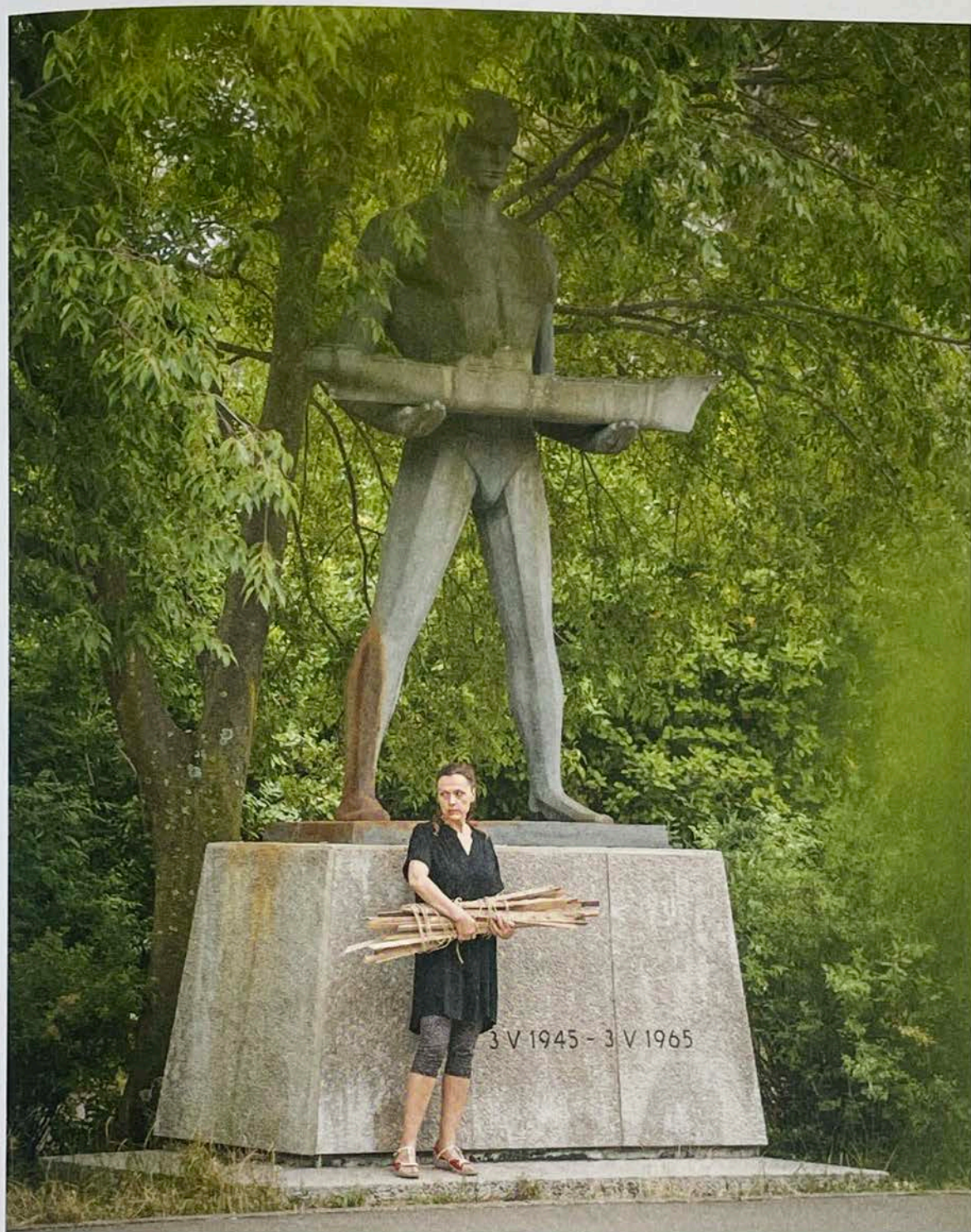
So the project revealed itself to me by chance. Since I was taking the photographs while on a guided walking tour through the vast bunker, I often took them at odd angles. The light from fluorescent tubes in the rooms reflected in the glass, interacting with the image of Tito's face – distorting and obscuring it – the merging of a human face with a streak of light creating a range of associations. Depending on the angle I was looking from, the light fixture appeared to puncture the front of Tito's forehead or to reflect a band of light across his eyes, effectively 'blinding' him. At other angles, the light reflected in the glass appears across Tito's neck like a blade or a guillotine, perceptually separating his head from his torso.

The light reflected on the glass creates different optical effects – blends, waves, distortions – which abstract and compromise the image of Tito's composed and authoritative face in different ways. For me these transformations emphasise that looking at any historical material is always distorted, affected by the 'now', contingent on the vantage point from which you happen to be looking. In this sense, Tito almost becomes a stand-in for any temporally displaced object in this process of looking back, a proxy for that which we reflect on from a distance – geographical or temporal.

Encountered in the space of the bunker – a time capsule in which socialist objects and legacies have been preserved – Tito appears oblivious to the violence that was raging on the ground in Bosnia just outside of the bunker walls in the 1990s, and to the changes that have happened since. *After Tito, Tito* – which takes its title from a slogan coined after Tito's death in 1980 – stages a meeting between the historical portraits of Tito depicting him as a stoic and charismatic figure and their contemporary distorted mirror images produced in the troubled space of stasis that is the Konjic bunker.

The bunker took 26 years to build, at a cost equivalent to \$4.6 billion today – paid for by our parents' generation – and in the end it wasn't needed. An incredible amount of time, money and effort went into preparing for a specific threat which never came. Instead, only roughly a decade after the bunker was finished, a different kind of disaster happened, one that no one was prepared for and from which no one could hide.

GV: *Your Who Come to Stand performance creates a sense of care, solidarity and pride through the interaction between humans and nature. What would you say about its possible interpretation as a straightforward political act directly related to a certain era or system, which may be experienced concurrently as a trauma and as nostalgia?*



Vlatka Horvat: *Who Come to Stand*.
2018. 8-hour performance. Photo: Hrvoje Skočić. Courtesy the artist.

VH: For *Who Come to Stand*, I extended an invitation to the residents of Rijeka, a port city on the Croatian coast, to join me in a kind of vigil beside a statue of a male figure holding a model ship, which stands at the entrance to the shipyard 3. maj. Once one of the largest, most powerful companies in the former Yugoslavia, in recent years the shipyard has pretty much been run into the ground – a large percentage of its workforce laid off, its machinery sold and its decades of knowledge and practical expertise squandered in shady transactions. Erected in 1965, on the

20th anniversary of the liberation of Rijeka, the larger-than-life statue that I chose as the location for my performance – the work of the Rijeka-born sculptor Vinko Matković – towers on the side of the road with the sea behind it, the figure watching over the ship in his hands in a gesture of profound attention and pride. As a representation of a labourer holding the thing he made, the monument both celebrates and memorialises – and in the current socio-political and economic context of Croatia, also mourns – work and workers, specifically celebrating the industrial heritage of shipbuilding and seafaring and the labour of the hands. I invited residents of Rijeka to stand with me beside the statue, holding an object of their choice – something they wanted to watch over or celebrate – a work tool perhaps, or a personal item, a photograph, a thing they made.

My idea was to gather people in a silent performance action at the roadside – to stand there with something of personal or social value in face of the destruction of public goods and resources, of the privatisation of collectively-owned companies and firms, of the erosion of workers' rights and the loss of jobs, as the economy of Croatia's coastal regions has been shifting towards tourism since the 1990s.

The gesture of standing with the statue did not announce an explicit critique. I saw my project as a kind of mirroring of what was an already powerful presence in the public space of the city, an act of solidarity with the stone statue. However, when I was joined by other people this became a political gesture that resonated with local labour history. Numerous others joined me throughout the day, bringing many different kinds of objects to hold. One group comprised former workers from the shipyard – people whose entire families, going back generations, had worked there. The object several of them brought along was a miniature replica of the statue of the man cradling the ship. This replica was a parting gift each worker received when they were made redundant. Having the workers join me was something truly unexpected for me – moving, powerful, and absolutely political.

As well as people who came to stand with me beside the statue, there were numerous others who voiced support in different ways: drivers raising their (revolutionary) fists from their car windows or motorbikes, honking their horns and shouting encouragement, people on the bus giving silent nods, and others bringing fruit and snacks to share with those keeping vigil.

As the work met with public response, the man holding the ship stopped being just a representation of a 'former' era, or a representation of the spirit or an ideology of a time past. He became a present figure, not a historical one. He became all the people who have lost their jobs – all the people who came to stand with him and with me, holding their miniature replicas or other objects of importance. He became everything that's been lost there – all the things, and all the lives.

Invisible Wounds

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Courtesy of Museums Sheffield.

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