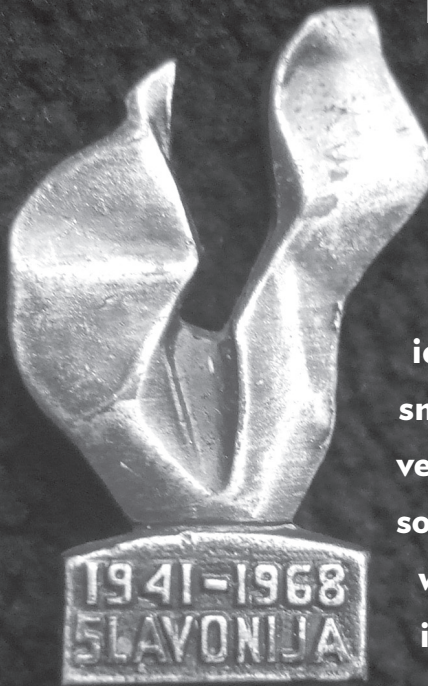


Hands cannot do anything unless there is an idea guiding them... The only true path of development is in the working process.



I don't believe in the theory that an artist is a God-given person. Personally, I've always felt somewhat foolish. You have an idea, a feeling; it is a small and sometimes very exciting moment, a sort of foreboding... But when you try putting it into practice, you see that you're in fact

powerless, that you're missing a hundred elements. And then you start checking things out, running after it like a child, until you catch it somewhere, if you're strong enough to persevere in that race, a race for the elusive...

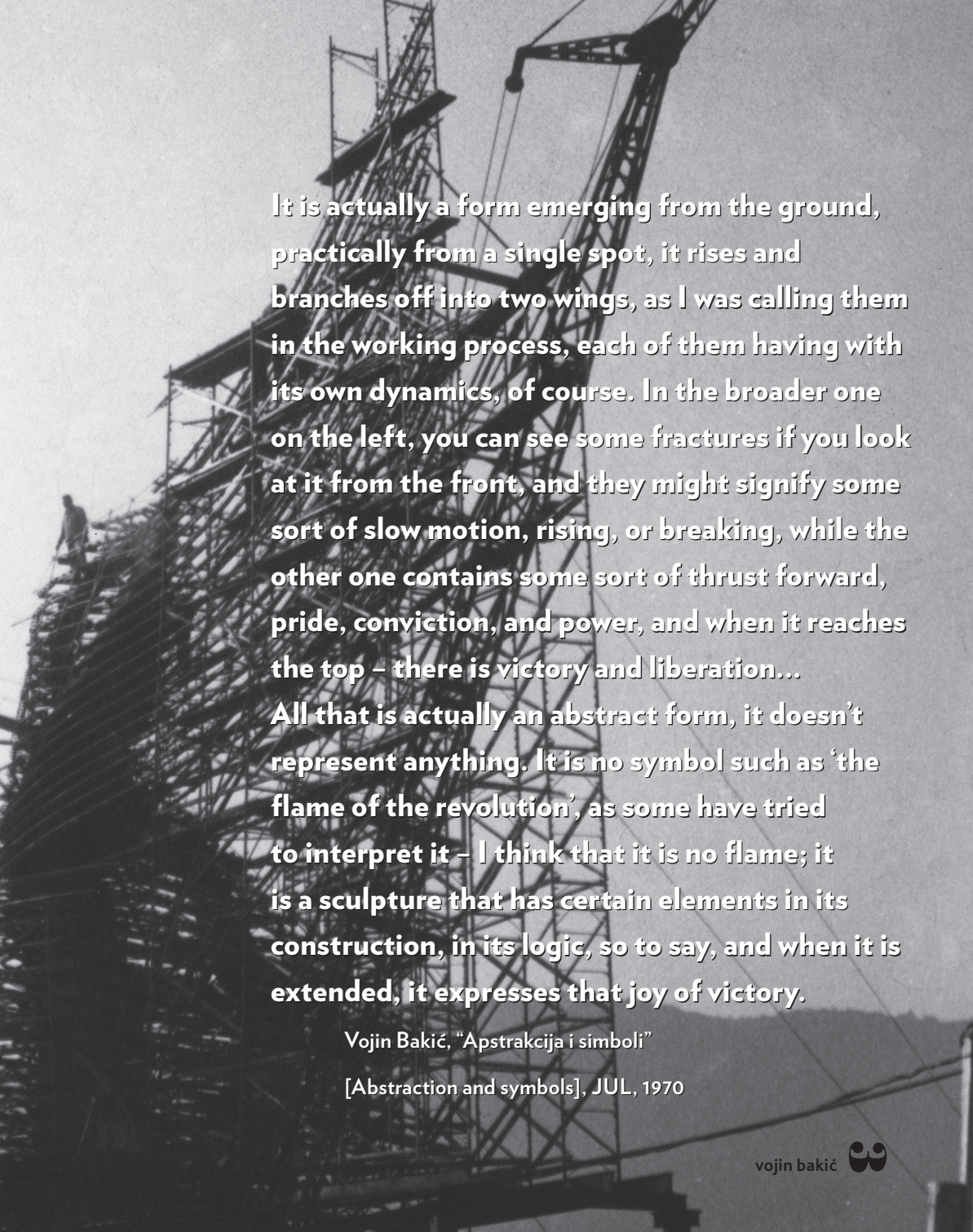
Vojin Bakić, Omladinski tjednik, 1975

BRANKO



vojin bakić



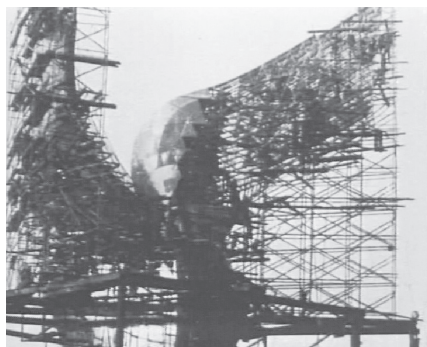
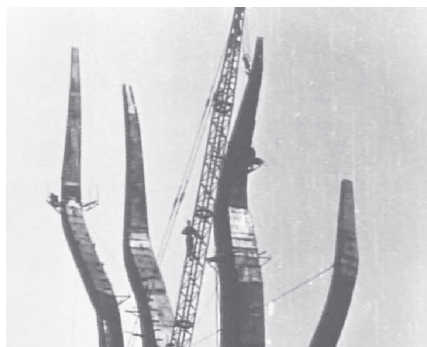


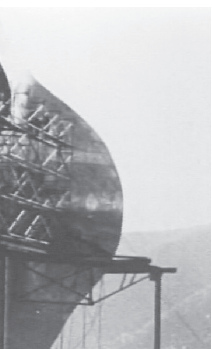
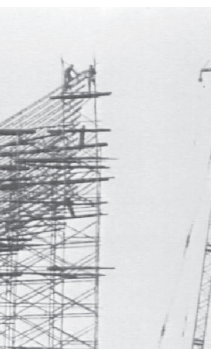
It is actually a form emerging from the ground, practically from a single spot, it rises and branches off into two wings, as I was calling them in the working process, each of them having with its own dynamics, of course. In the broader one on the left, you can see some fractures if you look at it from the front, and they might signify some sort of slow motion, rising, or breaking, while the other one contains some sort of thrust forward, pride, conviction, and power, and when it reaches the top – there is victory and liberation... All that is actually an abstract form, it doesn't represent anything. It is no symbol such as 'the flame of the revolution', as some have tried to interpret it – I think that it is no flame; it is a sculpture that has certain elements in its construction, in its logic, so to say, and when it is extended, it expresses that joy of victory.

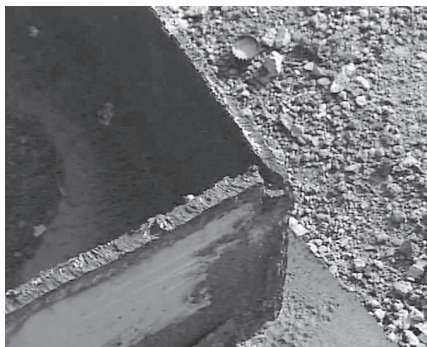
Vojin Bakić, "Apstrakcija i simboli"

[Abstraction and symbols], JUL, 1970

Monument to Victory of People of Slavonia
Kamenska, 1958 ★ 1964 ★ 1968







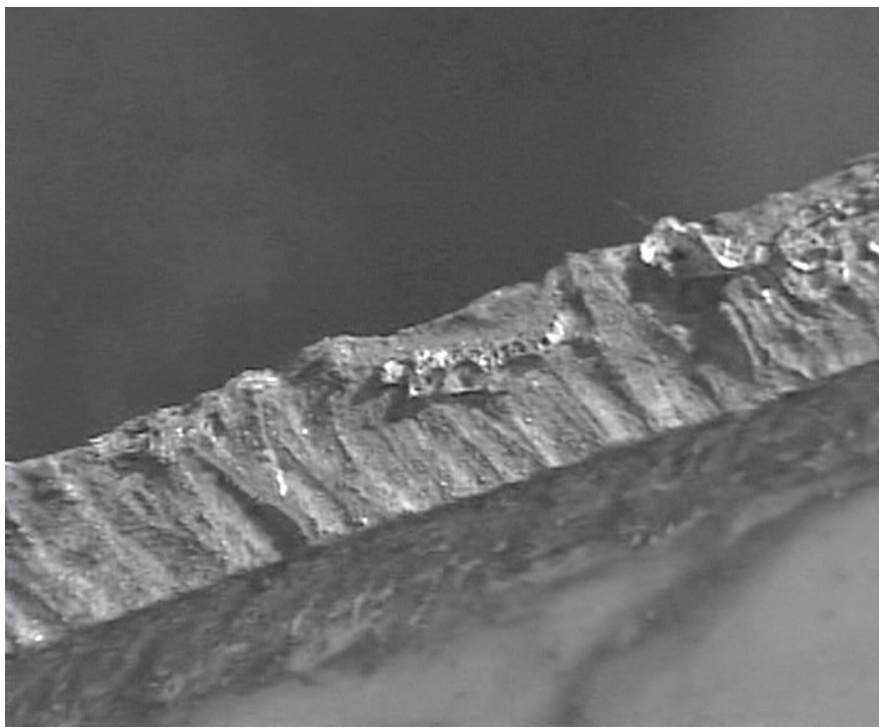
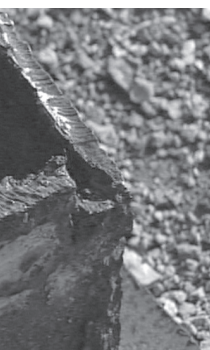
I don't think that any senseless abstraction can serve as a symbol of war or a monument to the warriors. In fact, an abstract form may not even be abstract in its essence. For example, I may perceive its elements in a different way. For when people ask "what does it represent?" the answer is this: it doesn't represent anything, just like the obelisk doesn't represent anything.

Vojin Bakić, "Apstrakcija i simboli" [Abstraction and symbols],

JUL 1970



vojin bakić



▲ Monument to Victory of People of Slavonia at Kamenska,
destroyed on 21st February 1992 by members of **123. bojna HV**
[123. Brigade of Croatian Army]

vojlin bakić

4.6–24.8.2008

 **grazer
Kunst-
verein**

curated by:
What, How & for Whom / WHW
&
Ana Bakić





After the wave has passed, permanent values come back to light all by themselves, without being illuminated. The true things carry their light within themselves, and our batteries are never empty.

Michel Seuphor

the exhibition catalogue

'Bakić, Picelj, Srnec',

Denise René Gallery,

Paris 1959

◀ **Bakić in front of Hans
Arp's sculpture, Meudon
1959, photo: Ivan Picelj**



1915 born in Bjelovar on June 5

1934–1938 studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, Zagreb

1938–1940 specialisation with **Ivan Meštrović**

1940–1945 specialisation with **Frano Kršinić**

1940 his first solo exhibition at the Institute for Music, Bjelovar
participates in the First Annual Exhibition of Croatian Artists at the Artists' Centre, Zagreb

1941 Ustasha⁰¹ forces kill four of his brothers

1942–1944 participates in the Second, Third, and Fourth Annual Exhibitions of Croatian Artists at the Art Pavilion, Zagreb [at that time in NDH, Independent State of Croatia]

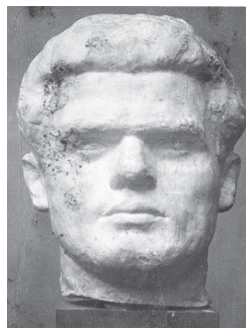
1946 portrait of **Ivan Goran Kovačić**
participates in the First Exhibition of Professional Artists at the Art Pavilion, Zagreb

1947 his "Monument to the Executed / Call to Arms" is inaugurated in Bjelovar
awarded by the People's Republic of Croatia for his "Monument to the Executed"

participates in the "Painting and Sculpture of Yugoslav Peoples in the 19th and 20th Centuries," Belgrade – Zagreb – Moscow – Leningrad – Bratislava – Prague, with his "Head" and "Bull"



▲ **Bakić** at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, in the Class of **Frano Kršinić**, 1944



▲ Portrait of partisan poet **Ivan Goran Kovačić** [1913–43]

01 Ustashes was a Croatian nationalist far-right movement that under Nazi protection ruled Croatia during the 2nd world war.

joins the former studio of **Ivan Meštrović** in Ivan Goran Kovačić Street [together with **Kosta Angeli Radovani**, **Rudolf Ivanković**, **Dalibor Mačukatin**, and **Frano Baće**]

1948 awarded by the People's Republic of Croatia for his monument to **Ivan Goran Kovačić**

1949 one-month artist residency in Paris

participates in the First Exhibition of the Artists' Association of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia at the Modern Gallery, Ljubljana, exhibiting portraits of **Maxim Gorky**, **Svetozar Marković**, and **Ivan Goran Kovačić**

1950 participates in the Yugoslav Pavilion at the 25th Venice Biennale together with **Radovani**, **Augustinčić**, and **Radauš**, exhibiting his Monument to **Ivan Goran Kovačić** and Monument to the Executed

1953 his design for a monument to **Marx and Engels**, to be placed on their square in Belgrade, unleashes a fierce controversy; a jury consisting of three literary authors [**Milan Bogdanović**, **Miroslav Krleža**, and **Josip Vidmar**] vetoes the construction

his design for a monument to **Jovan Jovanović Zmaj** for the city of Novi Sad is rejected

awarded by the Association of Yugoslav Unions

1953–1958 explores closed volumes and detaches himself from social realism. Works in the thematic series on “Lovers”, “Bulls”, “Torsos”, “Birds”, etc.



▲ Sketch for monument to **Marx & Engels**, 1953

1954 participates in “Salon 54” – Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture in the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia at the Gallery of Fine Arts, Rijeka, with “Self-Portrait”, “Portrait of Tošo Dabac”, and “Head”

1955 participates in the “1st Mediterranean Biennial” in Alexandria, with “Female Torso”, “Head of a Woman”, “Head of a Poet”, and “Composition”

1956 his studio is damaged by fire, which destroys artworks and documentation; another studio is assigned to him at 10 Rokova Street

participates in the Yugoslav Pavilion at the 28th Venice Biennale, together with **Vujaklija**, **Pregelj**, and **Protić**, exhibiting several “Heads” and “Torsos”, as well as his “Head of a Horse”, “Reclining Torso”, “A Nude”, “Bull”, and “Sculpture”

awarded for his “Bull” by the City of Zagreb

1957 participates in the Exhibition of Yugoslav Artists [from the Venice Biennale] in Antwerp

Contemporary Yugoslav Art, Milan–Warsaw

1958 begins working on cycles “Foliated Forms” and “Polyvalent Forms”

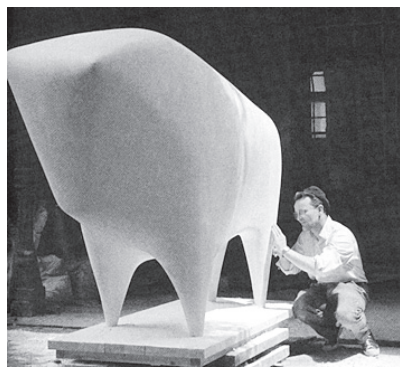
Milan Prelog publishes the first monograph on **Bakić**’s life and work

his second solo exhibition at the Municipal Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

participates in the Yugoslav Pavilion at the World



▲ Salon 54, poster designed by **Ivan Picelj**



▲ Bakić working on Bull, photographed by **Tošo Dabac**

Exhibition in Brussels with a “Bull” cast in bronze, and in the central exhibition of “Fifty Years of Contemporary Art”

exhibits with “Zagreb 58” group at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp

1959 exhibits at Denise René Gallery in Paris [together with **Ivan Picelj** and **Aleksandar Srnec**], at that time the leading gallery specialized in geometric abstraction; theoretician **Michel Seuphor** and artist **Viktor Vasarely** write the introduction to the exhibition

one of his “Foliated Forms” is placed in the café in the Ilica skyscraper

awarded for his “Foliated Forms I” by the City of Zagreb

Michel Seuphor includes him in his overview of world abstract sculpture

exhibits at Documenta II in Kassel

1960 begins working on his cycle “Developed Surfaces”

exhibits at Drian Gallery in London, together with **Ivan Picelj** and **Aleksandar Srnec**

his monument to **Stjepan Filipović** is inaugurated in Valjevo

Carole Giedion-Welcker includes him in her overview of contemporary sculpture

1961 solo exhibition at Mala Gallery in Ljubljana

exhibits at Drian Gallery in London, together with **Picelj** and **Srnec**



▲ Drawing for monument to **Stjepan Filipović** damaged by fire in studio



▲ **Bakić Picelj Srnec**, Drian Galleries, 1961, poster designed by **Ivan Picelj**

exhibits his “Foliated Form I,” “Composition II,” and “Relief I” at the Exhibition of Yugoslav Art, Wiesbaden – Essen – Frankfurt – Stuttgart

“International Abstract Constructivist Art” at Denise René Gallery, Paris

1962 completes two of his sculptures – “Ivan Goran Kovačić” and “Bull” for public spaces in Zagreb

“Exhibition of Yugoslav Art,” Rome – Bari – Milan

1963 participates in the exhibition “New Tendencies 2” at the Municipal Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, with two of his “Radiating Forms”, which would later give birth to “Lightbearing Forms”

participates in the 7th Biennial of Contemporary Sculpture in Park Middelheim, Antwerp

1963–1968 works on his cycle “Lightbearing Forms”

1964 participates in the 32nd Venice Biennale, exhibiting his “Lightbearing Forms 5” at the central pavilion, dedicated to “Contemporary Art in Museums”

monument to **Ivan Goran Kovačić** is inaugurated in Ribnjak Park, Zagreb

solo exhibition at the Municipal Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb. Poster designed by **Ivan Picelj**

1965 solo exhibition at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade

solo exhibition at Mala Gallery, Ljubljana



▲ New Tendencies 2, poster designed by **Ivan Picelj**



▲ **Vojin Bakić** at Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb 1964, poster designed by **Ivan Picelj**

participates in the “Trigon 65” exhibition at Neue Galerie, Graz

1966 last solo exhibition at the Municipal Museum, Bjelovar

participates in the 2nd International Salon of Pilot Galleries, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, with his “Lightbearing Forms”

Herbert Read includes him in his “Brief Overview of Modern Sculpture”

1967 awarded the Golden Plaque for Sculpture at the “3rd Triennial of Yugoslav Art” in Belgrade

anniversary exhibition at Drian Gallery, London

World Exhibition EXPO '67, Montreal

Udo Kultermann includes him in his overview of contemporary sculpture

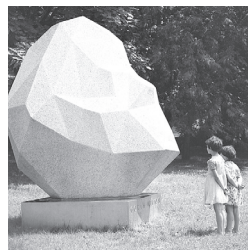
1968 Dotrščina monument is inaugurated

“Monument to the Victory of People of Slavonia” [which he began in 1958], part of the “Foliated Forms” cycle, is inaugurated in Kamenska

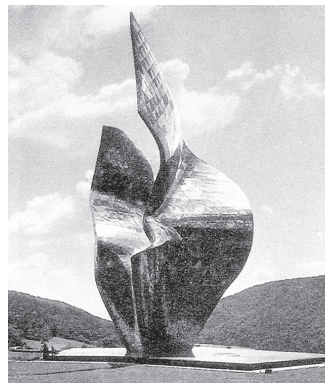
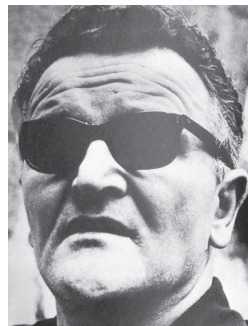
obtains commissions for “Bulls” from Germany and Belgium

1969 participates in “Tendencies 4” at the Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, with “Lightbearing Forms”

exhibits “Lightbearing Forms” at the 10th Biennial in Sao Paolo



▲ Monument to Ivan
Goran Kovačić, Zagreb



▲ Monument to the Victory of People of Slavonia, Kamenska

first prize at the 7th Biennial of Mediterranean Countries in Alexandria

International Sculpture Exhibition at Drian Gallery, London

monument in Kamenska is criticised because of its high cost

1970 completes his cycle “Circulations in Space”

Award for Sculpture at the 5th Zagreb Salon

participates in the exhibition “Contemporary Yugoslav Sculpture” at Hayward Gallery, London, with “Developed Surfaces” and “Lightbearing Forms”

1971 “New Tendencies – 10 artists from Zagreb”, Mainz – Recklinghausen

1973 “Tendencies 5”, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

1975 first prize at the revised competition for the monument on Petrova Gora

1978 completes Monument to the Victims of Railway Accident in Zagreb

1979 “Tendencies of Contemporary Art in Yugoslavia,” Luxembourg – Rome

1980 receives the “Vladimir Nazor” achievement award

1981 monument on Petrova gora [which he began in 1972] is inaugurated



▲ With designer **Mihajlo Arsovski** at the opening of his exhibition in Gallery SC, Zagreb 1972



▲ Project of the monument at Petrova Gora, Acta Arhitectonica, Zagreb 1981

Monument of People's of Croatia to the Kragujevac Victims is inaugurated

"Abstract Tendencies in Croatia, 1951–1961," Modern Gallery, Zagreb

included in the "Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Art"

1987 proposes designs for **Tito's** monuments in Zagreb and Zadar

1988 solo presentation at the "3rd Triennial of Croatian Sculpture," Gliptoteka, Zagreb

becomes a member of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts [JAZU]

1990 in Bjelovar, Bakić Brothers street and the **Milan Bakić** school are renamed

1991 in Bjelovar, his "Monument to the Executed" is blown up, leaving only the head and hands untouched

"Gudovčan" monument to the victims of war is blown up

"Monument to the Heroes of War" in front of the school in Čazma is removed

"A Thousand Years of Croatian Sculpture", MGC, Zagreb

1992 on 21 February, "Monument to Victory of People of Slavonia" at Kamenska is blown up

"Monument to the Heroes of War" in Bačkovica is blown up



▲ Summer holidays on island of Korčula



▲ Remnants of the Gudovčan monument to the victims of war

1992 Vojin Bakić dies in Zagreb on December 19

90s during the 1990s, there is no mention of **Bakić** in the newspapers preserved in the archives

Dotrščina monument is neglected and devastated

name plaque was removed from the “Foliated Forms” in Gajeva Street, Zagreb

studio at 10 Rokova Street has been locked up since the artist’s death, with several larger sculptures kept there in inadequate conditions

1995 “Constructivism and Kinetic Art,” HDLU, Zagreb

1996 “125 Greatest Pieces of Croatian Art”, HDLU, Zagreb

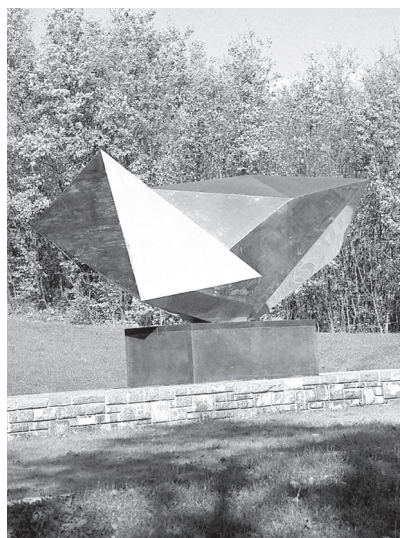
1998 Tonko Maroević: “Vojin Bakić”, photos by Tošo Dabac and Nenad Gattin [Nakladni zavod Globus and Serbian Cultural Society - SKD Prosvjeta, Zagreb 1998]

2001 “EXAT 51 and the New Tendencies,” Centro Cultural de Cascais, Lisabon, exhibition organized by MSU Zagreb and Centro Cultural de Cascais

2004 “The 1950s in Croatian Art,” HDLU, Zagreb

2005–2006 David Maljković exhibits models for Petrova Gora as part of his work on “Scene for New Heritage” at several international exhibitions: the 9th Istanbul Biennial, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, etc.

2005 the 90th anniversary of **Bakić**’s birth remains neglected



▲ Monument at Memorial
Park Dotrščina, Zagreb



▲ “Foliated Forms”, Gajeva Street,
Zagreb



“Self-Portrait”, “Torso”, and “Reclining Torso” are included in the permanent exhibition at the Modern Gallery, Zagreb

2006 exhibition on the “New Tendencies” organized by MSU Zagreb, Museum für Konkrete Kunst, Ingolstadt & Leopold-Hoesch Museum, Düren [2007]

2007 a “Bull” from 1958 is placed at the renovated railway station in Antwerp

“bit international– [New] Tendencies”, Neue Galerie, Graz & ZKM, Karlsruhe [2008], curated by **Darko Fritz**

owing to the citizens’ initiative, the sculpture of **Ivan Goran Kovačić** in Ribnjak park [decorated for many years with a graffito saying “Božo”] is finally cleaned

solo exhibition in Gallery Nova, Zagreb, 29.06-01.07.

SKD Prosvjeta launches an initiative for restoring the monument on Petrova Gora

restoration of several most endangered sculptures from Atelier in Rokova 10 started

proposal for monument to **Marx** and **Engels** exhibited in “Forms of Resistance”, Vanabbemusuem, Eindhoven

2008 the plaque commemorating brothers **Bakić** is returned on the façade of their family house in Bjelovar

after many years of lobbying and a public petition by **Dušan Matić**, “Monument to the Executed” is in the process of restoration and is to be put up in Bjelovar

solo exhibition in Kunstverein, Graz



▲ Gallery Nova, Zagreb



whw

In Conjunction, Not at All Accidental

In the last chapter of her “Dreamworld & Catastrophe”, **Susan Buck-Morss** referred to a seminar held in October 1990 at the Inter-University Centre [IUC] in Dubrovnik, which featured a number of distinguished thinkers from both sides of the crumbling Iron Curtain, such as **Fredric Jameson**, **Boris Groys**, and **Slavoj Žižek**. The symptomatic choice of locality for this academic ‘confrontation’ of East and West must be viewed

in the context of the specific cultural position of socialist Yugoslavia, which enabled rather free communication on both sides of the Curtain. On the other hand, the event took place only a year before the military siege and shelling of that same town, which would symbolically and factually mark the end of the project of Yugoslavia as a ‘community of South Slavic peoples.’ In those tumultuous circumstances of the seminar, **Buck-Morss** saw the beginning of a hegemonic shift in the perspective of intellectual discourse. Its very title – “Philosophical Problems in Postmodern Discourse” – indicated that postmodernism would no longer be seen as reserved exclusively for capitalist cultures. The author observed that it confirmed previously elaborated thoughts on modernism as the common source of both social systems, which also imposed the critical questioning of Western modernism as being apparently non-hegemonic, autonomous, and apolitical.

◀ VII Biennial of
contemporary sculpture.
Middelheim, Antwerp
1953, photo: **Erhard
Wehrmann**

vojin bakić

Precisely these specificities of Yugoslav “socialist modernism,” characterized by the relative liberality of the system, openness of its borders, and free exchange of ideas, as well as the possibility of encounters between theoreticians and artists from the Eastern and Western blocs, shape the basic context in which one should view the work of Croatian artist **Vojin Bakić** [1915-1992]. The pinnacle of **Bakić**’s activity coincided both chronologically and ideologically with numerous institutional platforms of progressive artistic and philosophical activity in Yugoslavia. Among these, one should mention the international art movement “New Tendencies,” based in Zagreb, in which **Bakić** participated, as well as the “Praxis” journal and the summer school on the island of Korčula, where leading Marxist philosophers from all over the world gathered in the period from 1964-1974. These and many other phenomena of Yugoslav “socialist modernism” had one thing in common: an ideal of

socialism that was more progressive than that of the bureaucratic power apparatus.

Along with the numerous contradictions and tensions caused by the problematic attitude towards the legacy of the socialist project, present-day art history in Croatia sees **Bakić** on the one hand

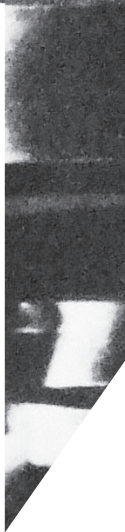
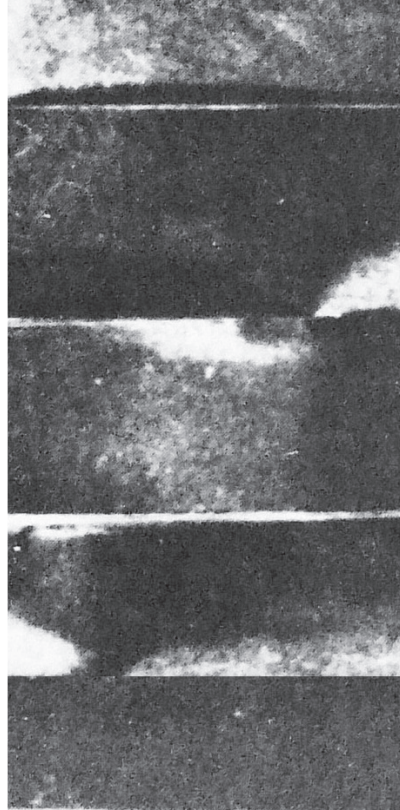
as an “authentic” modernist sculptor, a key figure in breaking with socialist realism and a proponent of abstraction, who forged

the paths of freedom for artistic expression in the 1950s, and on the other hand as a ‘state artist’ whose art was serving ideology. **Bakić** has

been highly acclaimed in official art histories, yet his monuments honouring the anti-fascist struggle

in Croatia were largely devastated in the heat of nationalism and anti-communism during the 90s. Both

local and international reception of **Bakić**’s work shows periods of intense interpretation and critical appreciation, but also significant silences and breaks in continuity. Thus,



vojin bakić



the dynamism of reception reveals the key problems in a series of crucial moments within “socialist modernism”, tangible anti-socialist sentiments in contemporary Croatian society, and the crucial issues in the relationship between “marginal modernisms” and the narrative of Western modernism.

From the very beginnings of the newly founded state of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, the ideas of universal modernist progress were interconnected with a specific understanding of socialism as a potentially radical, experimental modernist concept par excellence. Yugoslavia was particularly interesting as a cultural space in which parts of the communist political and cultural elite recognized correspondences between the universalism of modernist art and the universalism of socialist emancipation. Articulation of the specific model of modernist progress was performed so as to suit the new historical conditions in which the harmonious, humanist society was not just a utopian projection, but the prime objective of Yugoslav socialism.

As early as the 1950s, after breaking up with the patronage of the USSR and Yugoslavia’s withdrawal from the Eastern Block in 1948, one can observe the opening of foreign policy and a detachment from the doctrine of social realism. However, the rejection of social realism in the field of monumental sculpture was happening very slowly. One of the most important episodes in that process took place in 1953, with the refusal of **Bakić**’s proposal for a monument to **Marx** and **Engels** in Belgrade with an explanation that his portrayal of the fathers of Marxism used a “bourgeois”, mildly cubist expression – which caused some fervent polemics and diverse opinions. Nevertheless, only three years after that scandal, **Bakić** participated at the Venice Biennale of 1956 as one of the representatives of Yugoslavia, followed by the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1958, the Denise René Gallery in Paris in 1959, Documenta in 1959, etc. These exhibitions marked the intense presence of **Bakić** on the international

scene, which culminated in his inclusion in several seminal anthologies of modern art.

The 60s may be considered the pinnacle of his international and local reception, since it was then that he realized many of his crucial monuments honouring anti-fascist resistance.

The exceptional character of **Bakić's** monumental sculpture articulates the fact that marginal modernisms were not just assimilating the "universal" legacy of high modernism in the West; rather, they should be considered as its equivalent creators. From today's perspective, it is important to take notice not only of the ambivalent perception of **Bakić's** work and the devastation of his opus, caused by a problematic cultural policy based primarily on national identity and the rejection of the legacy of socialism and anti-fascism in Croatia, but also of the international oblivion that befell his work, which is indicative of the attitude of the Western European art-historical mainstream towards those artists whose activity, except in some exceptional breakthroughs, does not evolve in the heart of the capitalist system.

The fact that **Bakić** participated both in the creation of a global cosmopolitan identity and the formation of collective memory in

socialist Yugoslavia by using the same visual repertoire reveals the true face of modernism, pointing to its inherent contradictions.

The current, revisionist art-historical view inscribes into the post-WW2 Yugoslav abstraction a tendency of "restoring the sense of belonging to the Western European cultural circle" and understands modernism as a sort of continuity of the "bourgeois" culture. But this view fails to comprehend the fact that it was precisely that bourgeois, traditionalist culture, prone to academism, which strongly resisted all modernistic tendencies, and that modernism endorsed social change, since it was ideologically closer to the socialist project than to bourgeois culture. The enlightened communist consciousness saw modernist abstraction as something close to the universalism of its modern emancipatory politics. **Bakić's** work is among the most manifest examples of socialist modernism, in which the ideas of

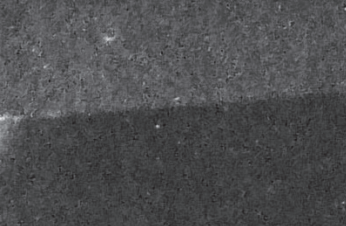
universal modernist progress have been permeated with a specific understanding of socialism as a potentially radical, experimental modernist concept.



While preparing the exhibition of **Vojin Bakić**'s work at the Gallery Nova in Zagreb in 2007, our wish was, besides establishing a critical perspective, to initiate a process of change, to promote a different evaluation of his legacy and a new attitude towards his sculptures and monuments. It was his first solo exhibition after more than 40 years and it problematized the semi-visible state of his legacy in the local context. The selection of his work, borrowed from the **Bakić** family collection, could be seen only from the outside, through the gallery's windows, and several times a week the doors were opened for guided tours. A permanently accessible archive, placed in a separate room, formed an integral part of the exhibition and its role was to place **Bakić**'s work in

a broader context. That way of presenting art inside a closed gallery was not an act of provocation or a self-sufficient curating strategy, but rather was enforced by the actual infrastructural and financial limitations of the non-profit gallery.

The exhibition at Kunstverein Graz is an inseparable part of the ongoing process of reestablishing the broken continuities. It is the first extensive international presentation of **Bakić**'s work since the time of his strong presence on the international art scene in the 50s and 60s, but it is not meant to be a retrospective and it does not seek to present all of his work. While the Zagreb exhibition touched upon some problems of local art institutions and their lack of functionality, of the tense relationship between national culture and its international options, and of the problematic attitude towards history, thus conceptually invoking the original significance of the term "problem" [to throw something before someone], the

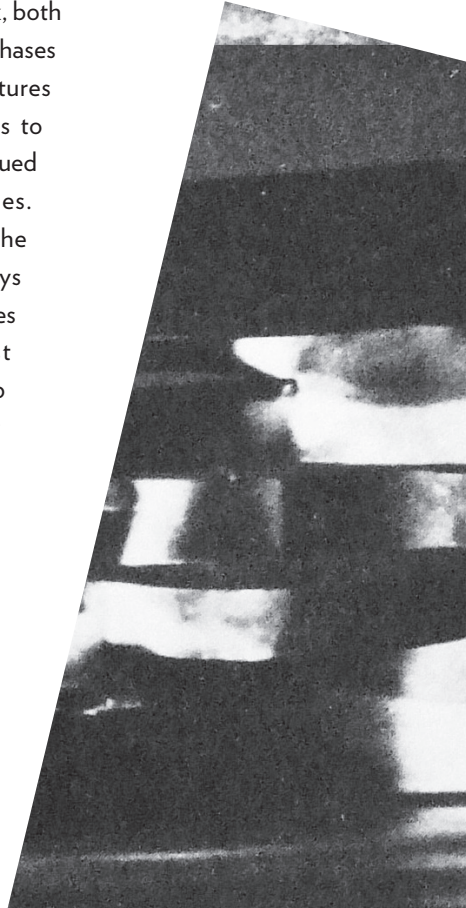


exhibition in Graz has consciously taken a different direction. Initiated by the curator and manager of Kunstverein, **Sören Grammel**, the presentation has been conceived in such a way that **Bakić's** solo exhibition will establish a

contextual and spatial framework for the subsequent presentation of several contemporary artists – **Luca Frei**, **Marina Hugonier** and **Sean Snyder** – whose common denominator consists in investigating various aspects of modernism. The exhibition has been realized in an act of repeated conjunction – a state of associating and linking various “elements” in space and time. In that process, the art of **Vojin Bakić** functions as a sort of common anchorage, his exhibition being a construed reference point.

With our selection of works at the exhibition, we wished to indicate the fundamental determinants of **Bakić's** work, both thematically and morphologically, covering almost all phases of his opus, including numerous anthological sculptures and monument models. Thus, the exhibition seeks to

thematize indirectly the fickle and construed confrontations of art and ideologies. What is the place of modernism in the contemporary world? In which ways can we consider its various trajectories through the prism of socialist modernism? What is the relationship between form and ideology? How does the essentialism of views on the “Eastern European quality” of art relate to the experience of the “universal” language of abstraction? In which way is modernism, depending on its specific historical and cultural determinants,

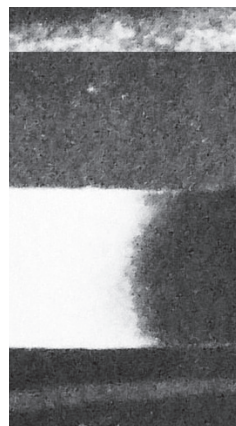
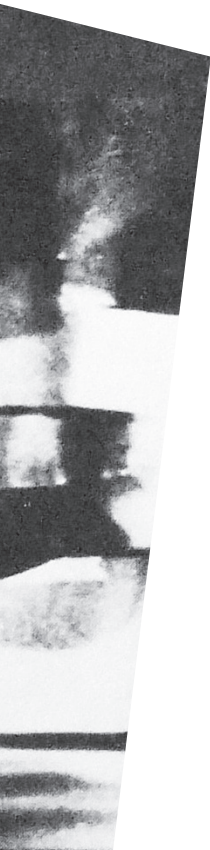


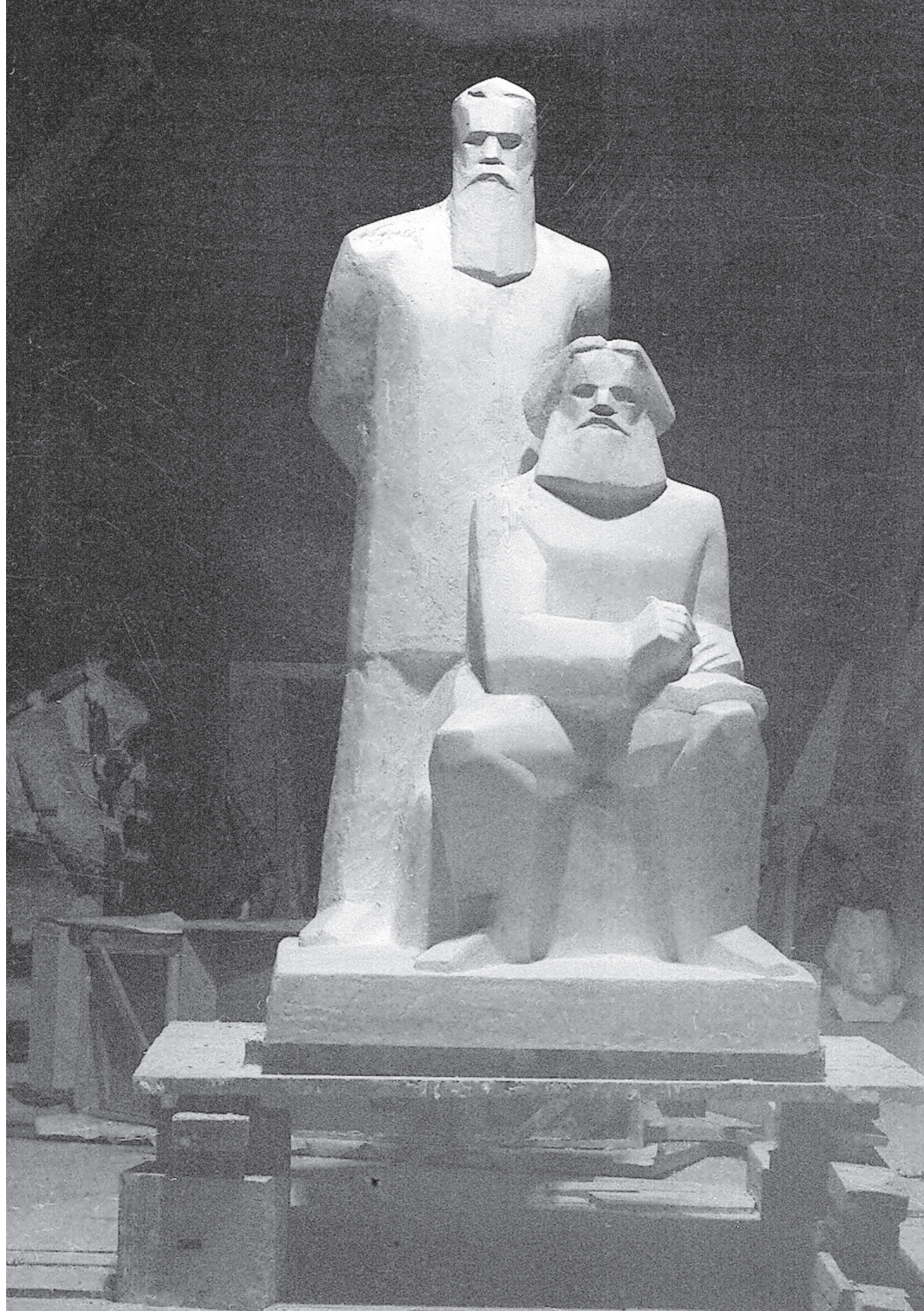


able to denote mutually opposite tendencies? How should we address these issues in an exhibition format? What is the position of cultural workers in this process? – these are some of the questions that we wish to raise with this exhibition. Only apparently void of all ideological “cargo”, can **Bakić**’s works function in space as fragments of meaning, drawing a wider outline of collective attitude towards modernism. Viewed in a broader context, this exhibition also indirectly, but inexorably, refers to the issues of including and integrating “marginal modernisms” into the Western narrative of art history, as well as to the symptomatic exclusions



and censorship in this process of ‘canonization’. In the case of the Croatian art scene, the evaluation channel has often had its source precisely in Austria, which has, owing to its vicinity, historical ties, and financial output, though not free of hegemonic resonances, “revitalized” and reassessed the cultural capital of Eastern Europe. And that makes Graz, as the site of international reaffirmation of **Bakić**’s work, a symbolic choice rather than an “accidental” one. ★





milan prelog

the work of vojín bakić

Finding articles on the pages of newspapers and journals dedicated to a more extensive review of the activity of some contemporary artist is relatively rare, and when does appear, it is normally prompted by a more or less conventional reason, such as exhibitions or anniversaries of some sort. Therefore, it is perhaps necessary to begin an unconventional article on the work of sculptor **Vojin Bakić** with an answer to this question: Why is this review of his work appearing just now?

Above all because a body of work which has been in the forefront of our artistic life for several years should have been analyzed in its basic extent long ago. For the wider public, these works only exist as a series of unrelated fragments, experienced in chance encounters. Despite the popularity of his individual works, the overall work and personality of the artist who created the exquisite tormented figure of poet **Goran Kovačić**, the monument to the executed in Bjelovar and other works, which from 1947 until today stand among the most successful creations of specific sculptural objectives, are too little known. Of course, one cannot make the claim that **Bakić's** works has not received recognition. Almost everything that he has exhibited in "review" exhibitions was met with positive evaluations by critics, while two works received the Federation Award [1947 and 1948], one received a Republic Award [1949] and one received the Yugoslav Trade Union Alliance Award [1953]. However, nobody has as yet attempted to analyze his work as a whole, to point out its position in this country's artistic creativity, to review its development and to follow it from work to

◀ **Marx & Engels, 1953,**
proposal for the
monument.

Photo: **Tošo Dabac**

vojín bakić



work. One day when this finally has to be done for some monograph, it will be difficult to reconstruct the course of his work over the course of the years. The works go off in often unknown directions, and individual phases of the artist's life and work become frayed in space and time. Somewhere, throughout the country, in Bjelovar, Čazma or Kolašin, monuments stand, while certain sculptures have been scattered among some remote offices and homes, in the atelier there are only a few clippings from newspapers, a few photographs, while in the Modern Gallery, that "anthology" of contemporary art, there is only one smaller and actually early example of **Bakić's** work.

To write about **Bakić's** work today is therefore necessary, because during the last two years a new phase has emerged in his work, and there are already a number of works which represent signposts marking a new path: a series of new forms which not only differ from the ones with which **Bakić** confirmed his talent earlier, but also from the immediate tradition of our sculpture. By departing from his earlier method of work, which brought him recognition before and by seeking newer, bolder solutions, **Bakić** has embarked upon a path which cannot be



considered easy. The beginning of **Bakić's** new phase was marked by a dual struggle: the struggle for a new, personally unique expression and the struggle to have this new form of expression recognized. While dozens of sculptures, variants of the same theme speak of the creative effort to find new solutions, parts of **Bakić's** new phase indicate the emergence of the first traces of conflict with existing demand, with tradition, with the static views of sculpture and art itself. In the current situation on the local art scene, this struggle for a new expression and new forms and that conflict with specific criteria and assessments do not have an exclusively individual aspect and significance, so that writing about them means touching upon some questions of principle in regard to the art of this country in general.

Born in 1915, **Vojin Bakić** belongs to today's "middle generation" of fine arts in this country. These are people who were born at the very beginning of the First World War or just before it started, and who, coming of age during that troubled intermezzo between the two World Wars, bloomed in full force in the years after the Liberation. Due to its specific position in the development of our contemporary art, this middle generation was called upon not only to create on the basis of an immediate tra-



dition of maximum quality, but also based on the logic of historical events in our country, which has led it to become the true agent of new aspirations.

The fact that new solutions are emerging precisely from the ranks of this middle generation, new ideas which mark a break with tradition, ensues from its position in the current era and the development of art in this country.

Historical necessity gives the struggle of the individual for the creation of his/her own artistic physiognomy the significance of a struggle for completely new orientations in our society's art in general. This generation saw off one period of our art and welcomed a new era; this is a generation which in some way sums up the last several decades of art here, and thereby also drew from this experience

the most expressive tools which the local tradition had to offer. Today, in as much as individuals, the members of this generation, do not want to move about in a closed circle, to create in their own static manners, they then have to set off in search of new forms. This problem of the middle generation is manifested in all of its clarity in **Bakić's** works, and the lines of his development are a part of the collective biography of this entire generation.

The following information from **Bakić's** biography should be emphasized. He was born in Bjelovar, a small town on the edge of a vast plain, which was established in the eighteenth century by some imperial military architect following a militarily rigid and regular design with wide straight avenues that intersect at right angles. It was in this provincial atmosphere that **Bakić** spent his youth, without any significant ruptures, including the normal course of elementary and high school. The large **Bakić** family house was abuzz with life and full of youth: during those interwar years it was inhabited by five brothers and one sister. Four years at the Academy in Zagreb [1934-1938] were lit by the subtle glow of this peaceful bucolic idyll. When **Bakić** held his first [and until now only] independent exhibition in Bjelovar in 1939, it highlighted the talent of a hale and hardy youth. However, although he stood at the very threshold of his sculpting career, this exhibition actually appeared almost at the end of a period of his life. This is because what came on the heels of this period tore down all vestiges of his once tranquil life. The war came, and **Bakić's** experienced the first tragedy of his life: in 1941 the four **Bakić** brothers, all communists, were killed.



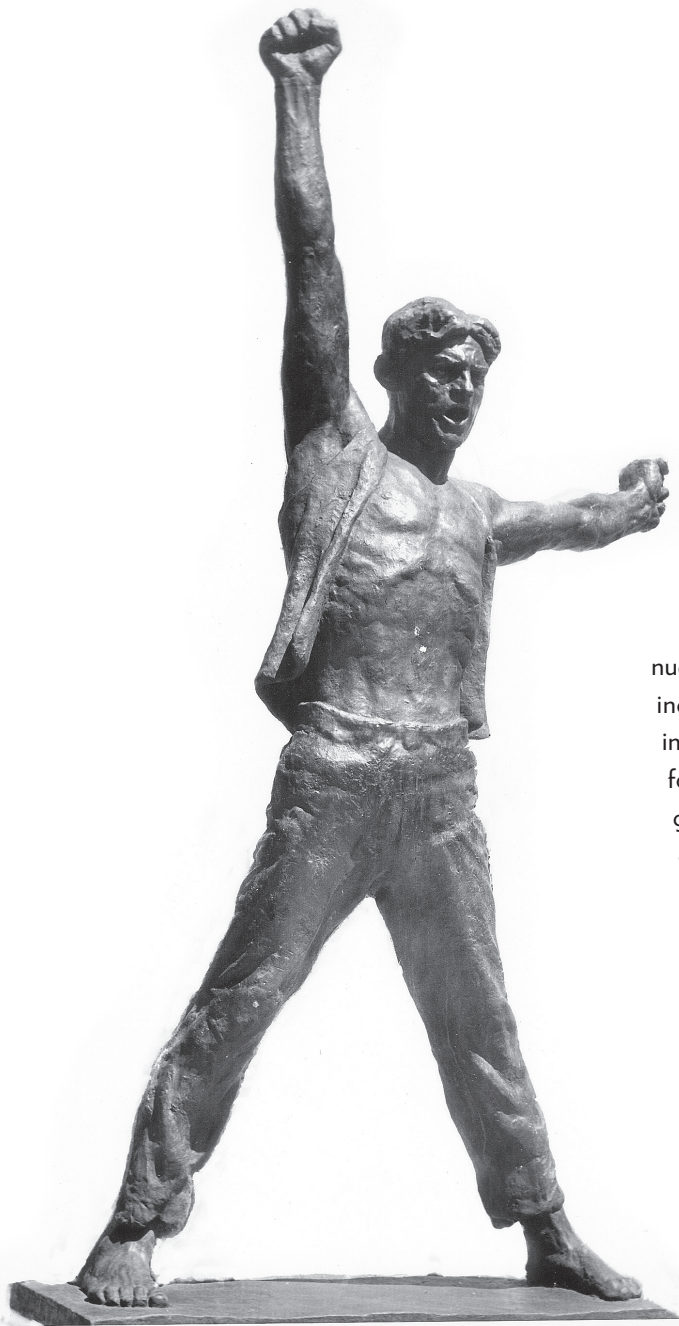
The nightmare of the war years followed, a time of bitter and arduous maturing. He continued his study at the Academy under the special tutelage of sculptor **Fran Kršinić**. Like in some dream of the past, the earlier motifs continue, but their resolution began to involve an increased massing of new strength, different from the previous serene and cheerful strength of a young man who just left the Academy. It was now a convulsive and somewhat raw strength; these were times marked by turbulence, and restlessness in man, who sought his expression as the earlier forms of previous themes were becoming too narrow to serve as a means of expressing all that troubles mankind. And when after 1945 this restlessness and strength burst forth like an eruption, they found new themes and sought new forms. Everything that had been building up over those long and difficult years was now liberated in feverish work. From the first exhibitions after the Liberation up to the present, **Bakić's** biography has actually been a chronology of intense work, and its significant dates are the dates on which

individual works appeared. Outside of his work, a few points have to be designated. Among them is one very tragic event: the death of his wife. There were also two shorter stays in Paris which served as brief rests.

In **Bakić's** work up until now, three clear phases can be discerned. And if we take the exhibition of 1939 as the beginning of his work, then the fundamental turning points can be designated as 1945 and 1950.

Today it is almost impossible to reconstruct that Bjelovar exhibition of 1939, and **Bakić's** beginnings by connection. The lost drawings which composed one part of this exhibition of completely early works disappeared. Only a few sculptures have been preserved from the period between 1939 and 1945. Therefore, this entire period can only be characterized in concise outlines. The works from this period display an astonishing maturity. Without almost any wavering, **Bakić** created a series of sculptures with a unique expressive form. This early maturity appeared almost as a result of a certain limitation in themes and forms. The domination of the female

◀ Monument to the
Executed / Call to Arms,
Bjelovar, 1947



nude as a motif and stone as a medium indicates **Kršinić's** influence, and this influence gained expression in formal formation to a certain degree. If any great influence on **Bakić** can be cited in this phase, it would perhaps be **Maillol**; this is the same world of peaceful existence of the body in space, without psychological tensions or movement. The female bust, the female torso, the standing female nude, the bathers and some other works from this phase emerge from the forceful and simple formation of the stone mass. Peaceful surfaces, the conscious avoidance of more forceful movement and each restless curve that would

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harm the statics of the stone nucleus, the “block,” clearly show the explicit aspiration to give the sculpture a framework of simple primary forms.

It was only at the end of the first phase that a more marked discord on the surfaces and in the movements appeared. While the small sculpture *Europa on the Bull* represents something of a connection between the earlier tranquillity and the newer tension in a fortunate thematic justification, the somewhat later work *The Bull* appeared in 1945 as an expression of accumulated force both in terms of form and motif. This piece represents that turning-point from which **Bakić** left behind the peaceful, lyrical world of female nudes and portraits and marched headlong into a maelstrom of new tasks. In fact, 1946 was the year in which **Bakić** produced the first significant work of his second phase: the image of poet **Goran Kovačić**.⁰¹ Along with its individual and sculptural value, this work is also important as the solution for a specific artistic objective, which can be referred to as the “idealized portrait.” This term is used to designate the portrait of a specific personality which lacks one of the normally basic prerequisites of a portrait: direct contact between the model and the artist. Instead of this direct, immediate documentation of individual data, the formation of a specific concept which the personality holds within himself instead comes to the fore. And if **Goran** lives in us and lives for future generations as the epitome of a poet and a bloody victim, then **Bakić**’s image is an adequate sculptural reflection of this epitomization. **Bakić** had to find a new formal expression to bring out this new concept. The psychological content which came to the forefront was produced by a restless working of the surfaces and empathic sharp clashes of light and shadow. This effectively took the place of the earlier tranquillity. Although **Maillol** stood in the background as the inspiration of the earlier phase, everything from the **Goran** image on increasingly showed that **Rodin** was the new inspiration.

01 | There are, in fact, seven details of Goran’s image: three small heads, two sketches of the entire figure, one head in stone and one in bronze.

Perhaps in order to understand **Bakić**’s transcendence of sculptural tradition, it is necessary to establish that in this second phase [which up to the present stands as the most substantial in the history of modern sculpture in this country] he applied the lessons of the great French master. This turn towards “impressionist” formation found its expression in a large number of portraits, and perhaps most clearly in the

portraits of poet **S.S. Kranjčević** [1948] and **V. Sinobad**. The further resolution of the problems of idealized portraits during that phase can be seen in the images of **Nikola Demonja**, **Rade Končar** and a series of portraits of **Tito**.

In 1947 **Bakić** completed his monument in Bjelovar to those who were executed by firing squad. In a series of this country's monuments which deal with themes from the People's Liberation Struggle, this work by **Bakić** stands out. It depicts a young man with his arms raised in a peaceful manner; there is a complete absence of any pathos and empty rhetoric. In a place where there is a play with "external" props, an incredible internal tension was created in this figure, and it became one of the most popular works made after the Liberation.

The unusual productivity of **Bakić** in this phase gradually led to a degree of exhaustion of the expressive characteristics which marked this second phase. The crisis in **Bakić's** work, which emerged in 1949, and which was partially reflected in the monuments made for Kolašin and Čazma, came about on the basis of a feeling that the means and materials he was using until then were exhausted, and that the expression he found in 1945 was too limited for an adequate solution to the tasks which abounded before him. This crisis could only be resolved in two ways: either a reconciliation with the limitations of the tradition which he grew up with or a break with tradition and the search for new paths. Instead of settling in his ways, **Bakić** selected new paths.

In the course of 1951, after several initial attempts in 1950, **Bakić** entered his new, third phase while working on several large monuments-primarily on a model for a monument to **Marx** and **Engels**. Over the course of almost three years, the images of **Marx** and **Engels** experienced constant transformation in accordance with the evolution of **Bakić's** new expression. Beginning with the first naturalist studies and moving on to two final variants [spring 1953], the work on this monument shows the emergence and maturation of new sculptural forms.

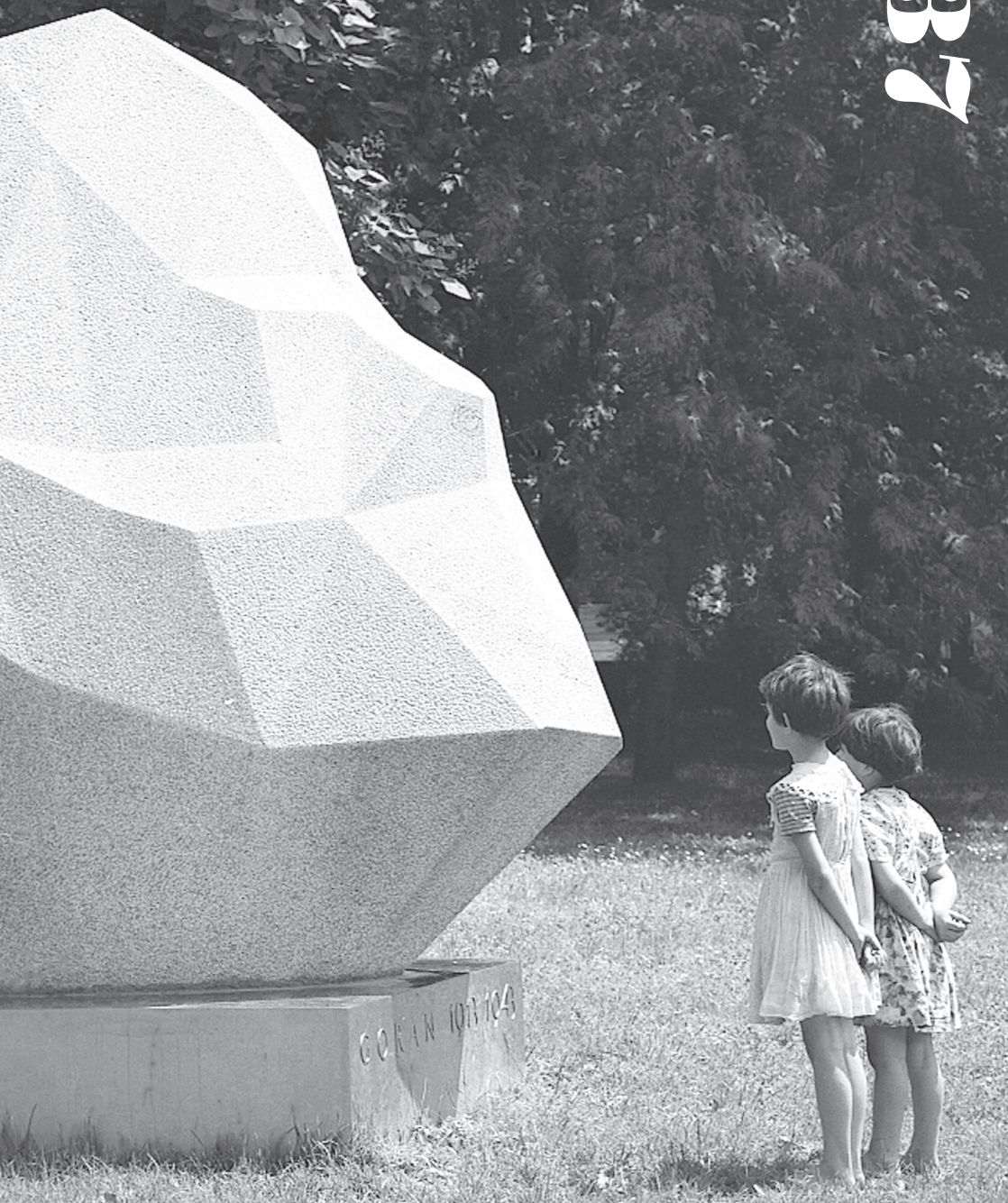
It is no coincidence that this emergence of a new sculpting concept was tied to this task. This situation which dictated the conditions of our sculpture after the Liberation caused the creation of monuments to become that factor which gave artists direction and prompted them to adopt new forms. It is precisely this genuine comprehension of the sculptor's task of "the

monument” that led **Bakić**, as well as some other sculptors, to gradually deal with this ambiguous sculptural concept, which dominated here as an academic tradition with various compromises and even misunderstandings. These misunderstandings are particularly frequent at that conjectural situation after the Liberation. Responding to broad social demand [which was often not even supported nor conditioned by some veritable artistic criteria], many sculptors, working in the spirit of direct tradition, actually refined its negative characteristics and increasingly stressed the secondary elements at the expense of the primary. Such a situation had, and will have, severe consequences for the development of sculpture, because such works created a given notion of monuments among those who commissioned them, as well as given notions on sculpture in general, and this often erroneous notion is brought to the level of a norm, so that today it has almost become a form of dogma in whose name everything that does not meet its specific standards is rejected. It is precisely from the lability of compromise between the primary and secondary in sculpture, i.e. between the very sculptural volume and the working of its surfaces which dominated sculpture at the turn of the century and survived in various form to this day, that numerous examples of empty rhetoric could have appeared here, from overestimation of narrative details to everything which we have long felt is missing and unfortunate in the case of many of the monuments which emerged after the Liberation. The sheer size of the task which was placed before sculptors required that they move one step further from tradition, to adequately create new forms on the basis of new themes and new content.

In an attempt to overcome this distressing compromise in the sculptural tradition and working on those large projects, by the end of 1950 **Bakić** initiated a radical revision of tradition and embarked upon a bold path toward new

“**Ivan Goran Kovačić**”,
Ribnjak Park,
Zagreb, 1964
Photo: **Tošo Dabac**





forms. Beginning with the search for these new forms, **Bakić** increasingly moved the focus of his work from processing surfaces to the formation of the entire volume of the piece, the mass itself, from details toward the whole. In such a formation process, sculpture no longer lives only on its surface, but primarily as a volume in space, and the move toward such solutions had to lead to the abandonment of petty descriptions on a surface. It also had to lead to the relinquishment of that refined “impressionist” play of light and shadow on the surface, which is often simply identified with psychological characterization. But the disappearance of these descriptive details does not occur as a result of the a priori negation of their values, but rather as a result of their integration into a larger whole. This maturation of new sculptural concepts can be clearly observed and followed in several of **Bakić**’s portraits which were produced between 1950 and 1953. This self portrait faithfully shows how **Bakić** attempted to tie every detail on the surface and every detail of the face to the mass of the head, and in these sharp breaks, the mass achieves a new unity of surface and overall volume. In other portraits, particularly those of a more recent date, the aspiration to no longer restrict portrait characteristics to a description of personal lines but rather create the formation of the overall mass of the head became increasingly apparent.

In its beginnings, this phase first manifested itself as the attempt to settle the surface, to have every part of the body have the effect of a simple mass. As a result, **Bakić**’s sculptures from this period display a contrast of sharp edges and smooth surfaces. This method marked his work throughout 1951, and its vestiges can be seen in the most important works commenced in this period and finished in 1952 and 1953, such as the studies for the monument to **Marx** and **Engels**, the studies for the monuments in Valjevo and Gudovac and the *Figure of the Agitator*. This method, or “technique,” is nothing more than a means of assistance for the sculpting aspiration to create the simplest organization of volume in space.

In a certain sense, two studies for the monument to **Marx** and **Engels** represent the summary of a persistent search for monumental pure forms, a search which lasted for almost three years. Intended for sculpting in granite in large dimensions [7 meters], these studies represent one of the most purposeful attempts to make a monument in such simple monolithic forms. Attempting to resolve the complicated task of the internal and external amalgamation of the two figures, **Bakić** found a propitious



balance between the vertical and horizontal and created a synthesis for the two so well-known historical figures. Perhaps the strongest work made by **Bakić** during the same phase was the model for a monument to the people's hero **Filipović**, who was executed by hanging in Valjevo in 1941. The courageous, defiant movement of the man, who shows his contempt for death and his enemy while standing at the gallows, serves as a call to resistance. This concept had already inspired **Bakić** earlier in the creation of the monument to the executed in Bjelovar. Dedicating himself to the creation of **Filipović's** image, **Bakić** aspired to simple forms while he consequently developed his methods further. He thus gave

this dynamically organized mass remained within the limits what we call an unusual suggestiveness. expressionist culture, i.e. a sculpture which can Perhaps a comparison between only be fully experienced when viewed up close. the monument in Bjelovar and By contrast, the Valjevo monument blocks out this the model for the monument close visual contact and represents a monumental in Valjevo can clearly show mass which can stand effectively in a limitless space, **Bakić's** evolution. Although and as a monument this is the only possible depiction of firm in mass, the Bjelovar one gesture and one stance, which was not only the act of monument, through its an individual, for it also became the symbol of defiance and faith to reality and its unwavering revolutionary ardor. During this fruitful period surface, has nonetheless between 1951 and 1953, the *Figure of the Agitator* appeared among a number of other portraits, which displays a simple yet monumental movement,

as well as a model for a talent within the framework of the existing monument in Gudovac. tradition of sculpture, **Bakić's** third phase

While the first and second marks a departure from that tradition. In phases of **Bakić's** may be his most recent efforts, he moves closer to described as representing the aspirations of contemporary European the affirmation of a powerful sculpture. However, **Bakić's** modernism is not the epigone-like appearance of some foreign influences. When **Bakić's**

evolution up to the present is closely analyzed, and when the actual position of sculpture in this country is fully comprehended, it clearly follows that **Bakić's** new forms grew from a concrete situation and the tasks which were set before sculpture in this country. The fact that the monument has become the dominant form represents a factor which led every artist to concepts of the monumental. In this sense, one cannot and must not deny the enormous importance of social demand for the development of domestic sculpture after the Liberation, but at the same time one cannot overlook the fact that in certain situations this social demand can emerge as a sort of obstacle to the further development of fine arts, especially sculpture. At these moments, conflicts appear which even emerged in connection with some of **Bakić's** works, above all in the studies for the monument to **Marx and Engels**.

A short report in *Borba* on October 3 of this year says that on the basis of a "negative opinion from the commission, works were halted" on the monument to **Marx and Engels** according to **Bakić's** sketches. This is the outer face of the conflict between social demand and an artist who attempted to solve a given task in accordance with his artistic consciousness by isolating himself from the existing tradition. His internal essence lies in the conflict between certain static criteria and concepts in sculpture, art itself and the very development of the fine arts in this country. For when one reads this condemnation of **Bakić's** work,⁰² it can clearly be seen that it was made primarily on behalf of the limited comprehension of the function of the objective of the sculpture, and only then with

02 | The text of the jury's opinion reads as follows: "The jury, consisting of Milan V. Bogdanović, Miroslav Krleža and Josip Vidmar, at its session of April 28, 1953, reviewed both proposals for the monument to Marx and Engels which the sculptor Vojin Bakić prepared for Marx and Engels Square in Belgrade. All three members of the jury came to their assessment on the basis of the following conclusions:

1. With regard to the given dimensions of the architectural proportions and space of Marx and Engels Square in Belgrade, the proportions of the sculpture are non-proportional, and in a space of these dimensions the monument essentially loses its monumental character.
2. The sculptural work as such, on its own merits, has the effect of a reproduction, and immediately, at first glance, it is doubtlessly accompanied by all of the elements of some sculptural concepts which are simply thrown together.
3. Both figures are made only superficially, with coarse treatment of materials, without any sort of characterization and psychological elements. They are simply two mannequins, of which the sitting figure is grotesque, like some sort of comical figure from a Russian play. The place of monumental figures who should symbolize one of the greatest historical ideas, the scene, almost has the opposite effect of the functional purpose of such a

- monument: disharmonic, and more than that, repulsive.
4. The sculptor did not fulfill any of the requirements, which are without a doubt very difficult and complex in a given situation. The problems of the clothing, fashion, design and style of the time, psychological details and the portrait are not given the full and detailed sculptural attention by the sculptor. Instead of leaving a granite impression, the sculpture seems wooden in a post-Barlach manner, without any sort of individual accent.
 5. That the characterization of the features is superficial and diffuse, in which framework the sculptor does not even take into account the concrete personalities, is proven by the differences between the figures in both variants. In one of these, Engels looks more like an existing stylized figure of Nikola Pašić, etc.
 6. It is due to the aforementioned reasons that the jury feels that not one of these models can be seriously considered for realization, i.e. to be built to scale on Marx and Engels Square as a monument to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.
 7. The jury recommends that the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia organize a general Yugoslav tender for proposals on a design for the monument to Marx and Engels on Marx and Engels Square in Belgrade."

arts in general, in this country. At the moment [if it is a matter of an official commission] that such unilateral criteria become conditioned, the danger of an enormous barrier being placed before the further development of our art emerges. There is a danger of "two art forms" appearing, one to fulfill social demand which is all too often adapted to non-artistic criteria, and another, which more or less furtively emerges as the result of genuine

regard to the model itself. To criticize a sculpture for "coarse treatment of materials" when speaking of a model [mock-up] meant for actual realization in granite and then believe that the sculptor did not fulfill any of the requirements, such as: "The problems of the clothing, fashion, design and style of the time, psychological details" – and then expect all of this of a monumental sculpture, simply means that on the basis of these criteria, only one specific type of culture is being considered, or more precisely, one phase in the development of both European and local sculpture, for which such elements represent an important part.

In the end, this means that on behalf of the sculptural ideals of the end of the nineteenth century, every sculpture which deviates from or opposes this norm must be condemned.⁰³ The stronger the authority behind such an opinion, as soon as there is the possibility of administratively fixing such a criteria so that it becomes the official opinion, then there is also a greater danger of hindrances placed before the development of sculpture, and fine

03 | Besides these, one could say, theoretically determined criticisms of modern form, the jury's evaluation also contains

artistic aspiration. The suspicion which art forms are met with here and which depart from tradition, from legalized convention, in a certain manner, is often nothing more than an expression of misunderstanding of the current position of fine arts in this country, a lack of confidence in its creative force and in the need for its development. The legalization of such criteria means to forsake that real art, which was acquired through the bloody sacrifices of our country, and this is the right and honor to move forward on as yet uncrossed paths in search of the new and the better.

There is no doubt that any party ordering a work has the right to reject it, but this rejection should be backed with sound arguments. In **Bakić's** case these arguments reflect an odd lack of understanding of monumental sculpture, and thus a paradoxical situation is created in which the most truly monumental work to appear after the liberation as the result of three years of hard work is assessed as superficial and rejected due to a certain lack of understanding. But this work should have had [and will have] a crucial importance to the development of monumental sculpture, an importance which will exceed the boundaries of this country. Because of this, we must be indignant that the pure and wonderfully harmonic forms, the figures of the great personalities and symbols of socialism, will not find their place in the capital city of a country which is at the forefront of socialism.

Through his overall previous work, and on the basis of the latest results of **Bakić's** activity, this work assumes a special position in the history of contemporary fine arts in

some phrases which are largely unclear. Thus, for example, it is not altogether clear what the jury's basis is for saying that the dimensions of the sculpture are not in proportion with the given dimensions of the surrounding architecture; is this on the basis of a model which has a height of two and a half meters, or on the basis of the proposal of the sculptor that the monument be made in granite at a height of 7 to 9 meters. Equally puzzling is the remark on the coarse treatment of materials, if we recall that the monument is supposed to be rendered in granite, just as the statements on a lack of psychological detail and portrait qualities are confusing, since this is a matter of a monumental sculpture of symbolic figures in the history of socialism. The most astounding aspect is the sharp tone of the entire jury assessment and the completely unjustified assumption in item 2 that the "immediately, at first glance" one can see that the work in question "is doubtlessly accompanied by all of the elements of some sculptural concepts which are simply thrown together," when it is generally known that the sculptor worked on these "concepts" for three years, which among other things is documented by

four large-format models from various periods, of which one was submitted to the commissioning party already in 1952. And finally, the use of the term “post-Barlach manner” is completely extraordinary. This is category which simply does not exist in the history of art. After Barlach’s tragic death in a Nazi concentration camp, no one to the present day has yet attempted to create forms which are similar to what this great artist created in pre-Nazi Germany. It is already in the photographs of the studies that Bakić’s aspiration was to render the sculpture in granite, thus in a material which is different from the materials used by Barlach, i.e. wood.

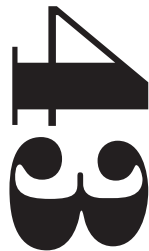
our country. **Bakić’s** three phases up to the present represent a clear and logical line of constant artistic development. The transitions from one to another phase appear as the result of the exhaustion of specific expressive possibilities, and just as **Bakić** once had to leave behind the quiet lyricism of peaceful female nudes and cross the formal and thematic boundary of his first phase to express the restlessness within himself and around him, so too did his second phase necessarily open the way to the forms which he sought and found in his third phase. The impulsive forces of that transition lie in the era. They appear from the tasks which that era imposed upon our sculpture, from the position of our art yesterday and today. Some may no longer like the **Bakić** of yesterday or the day before yesterday, but it would be wrong to grieve the fact that he left his first and second phases.

That **Bakić** had the strength to leave behind one form of expression before it settled into a routine, the fact that he had the strength to embark upon new untaken paths, show that he is a true artist. And in today’s situation in the fine arts in this country, fighting for a new personal expression, struggling against the obstacles and hindrances along this path, **Bakić** is blazing new trails for the further development of our fine arts. ★

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Milan Prelog, “Djelo Vojina Bakića”, *Pogledi*, 11 [1953], pp. 912-919.

Translation to English **Edo Bosnar & Ljubo Lasić** taken from Croatian Art Criticism of the 1950s, ed. **Ljiljana Kolečnik**, DPUH, Zagreb



vojin bakić



vojin bakić

After 1945, all of us artists faced the very important task of recreating the abundance of themes and subjects from our recent history of

the National Liberation and also from contemporary life. In doing so, we were supposed to avoid all formalistic playing around with the matter, and even all imitation of previous forms and models: we were to invent a new form, a higher and better form that would be adequate for our new man and the time in which we lived.



◀ Monument to Stjepan
Filipović, 1960 &
artist Antonio Gotovac
Lauer behind monument,
Valjevo 2007

Vojin Bakić, from the interview “Glasam za narod, glasam za škole” [I vote for the people, I vote for schools], 1950



jerko denegri

Denegri: Bakić and I belong to two different generations and we didn't live in the same town.

I haven't seen him often, only a couple of times. **Bakić** was somewhat outside the circles to which I belonged, he was not like **Ivan Picelj**, for example, who was always into things, bringing books and talking about exhibitions... While I was a student of art history in Belgrade, professor **Pavle Vasić** took us to Zagreb, to **Bakić's** studio, which was very interesting and also unusual, I mean a professor taking his students to an artist's studio. At that time, **Bakić** was still doing the sort of sculpture that resembled his bulls. Which means that it must have been before his art went into the direction of foliated forms.

One summer, many years later, I got an interesting opportunity to get to know him better. I can't remember the exact year, but I know that it was in Vela Luka on the island of Korčula, where **Bakić** had a studio in one of the bays. It was more entertainment rather than a serious visit to an artist's studio, but I stayed there a couple of days and I got to know him better as a person. We immediately dropped all formalities, regardless of our difference in age and status. He was a great man, amusing in his speech and the way he worked there... He would take a stone, work on it and talk at the same time.

Those were my personal encounters with him. We talked once more on the telephone. In Belgrade, the manager of Cvijeta Zuzorić Pavilion said to me one day: "I will make it possible for you to do any kind of exhibition you like, with any artist." That is when I thought of **Bakić**. I called him on the phone and told him that there was a possibility for him to have an exhibition, but he said that he was no longer interested, that he was preoccupied with his monument for Dotrščina. That was the last time I talked to him. You can see that our personal contacts were rather rare and our conversations on art were everything but exhaustive, but my impression of him as a person, based on those few days spent on that island, relaxing rather than working, were that **Bakić** was probably one of the nicest people that I have ever met in this professional world of art.

WHW: What was his status within international art history?

Denegri: I think that he was very important. **Jasna Galjer**, who has studied the

Yugoslav Pavilion at the World Exhibition of 1958, which took place in Brussels, has recently been to Belgrade and we went to the archives, looking for some documents. On that occasion, she gave me the catalogue of the Brussels exhibition, entitled "Fifty Years of European Art." It was the first seminal exhibition after World War II. Then there was the first Documenta exhibition in Kassel, which revised what was left after the *Entartete Kunst* and the revival of modernism after World War II. **Bakić** was present at the Brussels exhibition with his *Torso* and his importance was duly emphasized. The question is how he got there in the first place – it was probably at the suggestion of **Oto Bihalji-Merin**, who was sitting on the international jury. But there is no doubt that **Bakić's** sculptures of that particular type – which may be classified as torso reductions, with his famous *Bull* as the pinnacle – occupied a very prominent place in European sculpture. That was also evident in his successful presentation at the Venice Biennale in 1956, preceded by the fire that wreaked havoc in his studio, destroying almost all of his works and everything he had prepared for that exhibition. He also participated at Documenta II and the Biennial at Sao

Paolo. His importance was acknowledged everywhere he went and all these referential points took place within a few years. At the same time, he was published in several important books. You will find **Bakić** in a number of handbooks on European modern sculpture, written by authors such as **Herbert Reed**, **Gideon**, **Carole Giedion-Welcker**, **Hunt Trier**, and above all **Michel Seuphor**. All these authors acknowledged **Bakić's** importance. Sculpture was experiencing turbulent transformations, with great artists such as **Giacometti** or **Henry Moore**, the most

popular sculptor of the time. To

WHW: What was the position of his art locally? We are especially interested in his relationship with **Exat 51**.⁰¹

be mentioned among them, that was an absolutely great achievement for a Yugoslav artist.

01 EXAT 51 was an artist group active in Zagreb between 1950 and 1956. Its members were painters **Vlado Kristl**, **Božidar Rašica**, **Ivan Picelj**, **Aleksandar Srnec**, and architects **Vjenceslav Richter**, **Bernardo Bernardi**, **Zdravko Bregovac**, **Zvonimir Radić**, and **Vladimir Zaharović**. The group requested abolishment of frontiers between fine art and applied art and stood on the positions of progress, collective aspect of work, importance of conditions and social context of artistic practice, of experimentation, synthesis of all artistic forms and free confrontation of opinions.

Denegri: If we go back to **Bakić's** sculpture, not to the phase of his reductive forms, but to the head of **Ivan Goran Kovačić**, for example, it typologically belongs to social realism. But it is doubtlessly an exquisite sculpture and a supreme portrait. There is a whole series of similar sculptures from that period. Perhaps it was because of his age or because of his personal drama with his brothers and family, but **Bakić** had a sort of predisposition to be favoured in the new atmosphere of the 1950s. But he was doubtlessly also a very autonomous and mature sculptor at the time and his sculpture cannot be simply dismissed as social realism made on commission or reflecting the orthodox form of social realism, like that of **Antun Augustinčić** and some others. In a way, his early phase, before the bulls and the torsos, should be viewed as a part of the various developments in the monumental sculpture of the period. But in my opinion, that needn't automatically degrade him ideologically, not a bit.

As for his relationship with **Exat 51**, the crucial point was the monument for the Marx and Engels Square in Belgrade and all that happened around it.

That great story has been extensively described in academic literature. It is possible that we could find there the source of attachment that arose between him and **Picelj**, and **Aleksandar Srnec** as well. They did several exhibitions together, and as far as I know, but there I can only speculate since I don't know enough, those links were established by **Picelj**, by whom else? **Bakić** was never the type that went around galleries, travelled, or made appointments, and neither was **Srnec**. So one could presume that **Picelj** was the one behind the exhibitions of **Bakić**, **Srnec**, and **Picelj** at Denise René Gallery and the joint exhibitions at Drain Gallery in London, in 1959, 1960, and 1961. That was when they established a close connection, which may have been personal, but may have also been typological, because of the similarity of their art. **Picelj** and **Srnec** were friends and members of Exat, while **Bakić** was somewhat older, but it seems that they were connected through their inclination to pure form, which may have resulted in

Bakić's participation at the 2nd exhibition of the *New Tendencies*.⁰²

WHW: How did **Bakić** influence the *New Tendencies*?

Denegri: The first exhibition of the *New Tendencies* included only **Picelj** and **Julije**

Knifer from Croatia, and that was for a reason. That exhibition was only the beginning, the roots hadn't been formed yet. **Picelj** was inexorable. But then it seems that, in the conception of that second exhibition, there was a need to emphasize the local branch, to strengthen the local scene. He was joined by **Srnec** and **Richter**, who were no longer engaging in Exat type of art. **Richter** came up with his first system sculptures and **Bakić** joined him with his foliated forms. That was quite a surprise. Then there was **Miroslav Šutej**, also a young artist at the time, with his *Bombarding the Ocular Nerve*, but **Bakić's** presence gave certain authority to the local branch of the *New Tendencies*. Nobody could speak of "some artists over there" any longer. I don't mean to say that the others had a particularly bad rating, but **Bakić** had really become a distinguished and indisputable artist by that time. If he was joining the **New Tendencies**,

02 One of the most important international artistic movements of the 1960s, started with an international exhibition of Concrete and Constructive Art, called "New Tendencies" in Zagreb in 1961. In the period to 1973, this exhibition was followed by four international exhibitions organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb [at the time called Contemporary Art Gallery], ["New Tendencies 2" in 1963, New Tendency 3" in 1965, "Tendencies 4" in 1968/69 and "Tendencies 5" in 1973].



it meant that they couldn't be something *ad hoc* or transitory; their existence was obviously well grounded. That is why his presence in the *New Tendencies* was important, however brief, partial, or non-programmatic it may have been. My opinion is that **Bakić** didn't have to share the movement's ideology, I wouldn't even say that he knew it or cared about it. As for his deeper artistic reasons for making that passage from full volume to foliated forms, that is another question and I am not quite clear about it. It may have been part of the process of intimate artistic growth or simply a change in orientation.

WHW: How do you explain these transformations in Bakić's art?

Denegri: His full-formed sculpture, if we may call it that way, was ultimately based on a classical conception. It was a torso that was being eliminated, reduced to an oval, but the matrix was Brancusian, if I may say so, with a referential character. The foliated forms and the lightbearing forms – their very names revealed that the artist had made a mental leap into something that you might call fully abstract, or even concrete and non-referential sculpture. And that mental maturing process was not a simple story. In any case, he did make some sort of a leap, he stopped being a sculptor in the classical sense, even though he had been doing that masterfully, owing to his special training with **Fran Kršinić** and at the Zagreb Academy of Fine Arts, but also to his personal talent. That leap from one

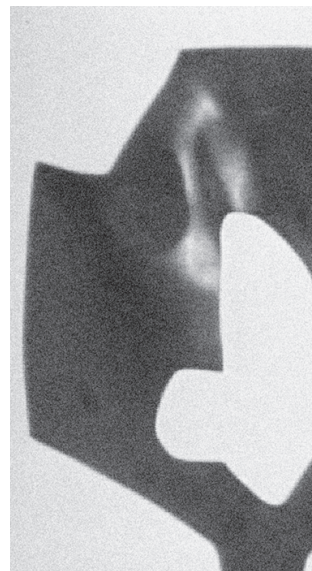
WHW: In his monograph on Bakić, Tonko Maroević has claimed that the sculptor did all his important achievements in the 1950s and 1960s, thus presenting his later work in a somewhat unfavourable light. What is your opinion on that?

type of form into another must have required a change in his mental set, rather than a formal procedure.

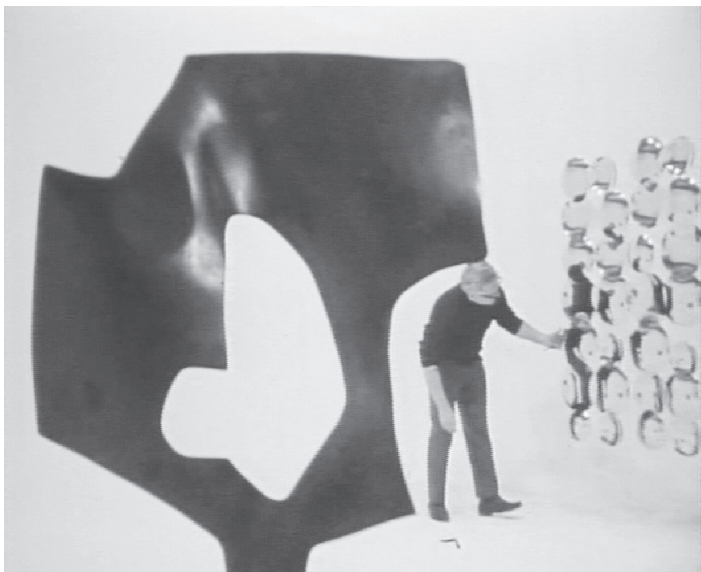
Denegri: I think that it is a matter of different backgrounds, of two positions where neither is really better or worse than the other. Both of them seek to understand how **Bakić** and **Ivan Kožarić**, for example, brought the concept of sculpture to its pinnacle, each in his own way. In both of them, one can observe a leap in the paradigm of sculpture rather

than a process based on formal techniques and procedures. Something must have happened in their heads, not in their hands. With **Bakić**, it happened in the form of passage to foliated forms and lightbearing forms; with **Kožarić**, it was something else.

Tonko prefers the classical conception of sculpture, whereby he has always appreciated the alternatives to a certain limit, but when that limit is reached or transgressed, he tends to ask about the possible reasons. I don't do that, since I think that in both cases it can still be sculpture, why not? It was only later that the notion of sculpture expanded to such an extent that the lightbearing forms of **Vojin Bakić** – regardless of the fact that they lacked volume and that some of them functioned in space as some sort of mobiles, that their surfaces reflected light, that they



▲ Stills from documentary “Vojin Bakić” by **Radovan Ivančević**, 1970



moved, and that things were mirrored in them – could still be regarded as sculpture. After all, such premises are also found in the constructivism of **Max Bill** and some others. We mustn't see sculpture only as a full, firm volume carved in stone or bronze. For that reason, I think, **Kožarić** and **Bakić** should be positively seen as sculptors.

Besides, in their maturing or mature phases, they should also be viewed as important factors on a wider artistic scene rather than just sculptors. We are talking of personalities who exerted influence with their ideas on art and its development in relation to new technologies, on all that was actually represented by the programme of the *New Tendencies*. Even though it seems to me, I repeat, that **Bakić** didn't necessarily have to know or share these ideas. I think that his mind was of the sort that wouldn't be too interested in the theoretical or ideological facet of the movement. Yet the fact that he saw what it was all about and that he felt the

urge to try it out is evident from the elaborate character of his sculptures. They are based on an entirely new matrix, the idea of a series, a disk that gets multiplied. That is an evolved notion of form. In that sense, it is clear that there were processes in **Bakić's** intimate development, be it as a person, sculptor, or generally an artist, that led him inexorably in that particular direction. It was

not a mere coincidence that happened to come his way.

WHW: What was the reception of these changes in his work at the local level, did it lead to a change in his status?

Denegri: Apparently, he was esteemed as a highly moral

person. Both his fans and those who were not particularly thrilled by his art simply respected him, both as a person and as an artist. Even that transformation of his was acknowledged and respected.

He was not the sort of person to glorify the new technologies for programmatic reasons, in the context of the *New Tendencies*. But he could still use them, and some of his sculptures, as well as his monument on Petrova Gora, can be interpreted that way, impersonally, as if they were the surface of a machine. But **Bakić** was probably guided by a different underlying motive, perhaps by the issue of interplay between light and what it symbolized, rather than issues that aimed at the topical problems. It would be worth investigating in some detail, but for me it is still a new topic and I am not yet in the situation to explain the processes that **Bakić** was going through. In any case, it must have been a very extraordinary development. It was, in all respects, a crossroads of two paradigms: on the one hand, there was the sculpture of the 50s, which rejected the real and preserved the plastic form, regardless of its references to torso, not crucial enough to violate the pure idea of plasticity; on the other hand, there was change and it could fit into what the *New Tendencies* were representing. Had it been only his internal development, had he not joined with these changes, the whole thing would have been less crucial. But his presence at the exhibitions was important both to him and to the local scene. When an artist is present in two places that are so important, it is unique.

WHW: Could you name someone else who might fit in the same paradigm, if one may say so?

Denegri: Ivan Picelj had some of that, in his geometric paintings from the time of **Exat** and his presence in

the *New Tendencies*. But from **Picelj** you would expect that, he was representing these ideologies in a way, imposing them and generating them. But **Bakić** was someone who came to offer these ideologies with the power of his authority, if I may say so. In some way, **Srnc** was also like that: his acceptance of kinetism was also a change in the paradigm based on **Exat**. The three artists had participated in some exhibitions together and it is possible, and this should be researched in more detail, that all those encounters, conversations, preparations for the exhibitions, travelling, and hanging out together may have resulted in mutual influences and motivated their orientation in various ways.

WHW: Why do you think **Bakić** had his last solo exhibition in 1966?

Denegri: It was primarily because he did not care about exhibiting his art frequently, and perhaps he was also preoccupied with other ideas related to monumental sculpture. I think that he was not interested in exhibitions, he was not that sort of person, just didn't find them too important. Perhaps he had a rhythm of life that didn't compel him to show by all means what he had been working on.

WHW: How do you perceive his interest in monumental and memorial sculpture in light of the fact that such activity, which in today's perspective we might call "coming out of the museum or the white cube," was permanently present in **Bakić's** practice?

Denegri: Regardless of the sort of excursions that he sometimes undertook and that led him in the *New Tendencies*, **Bakić's** training made him permanently preoccupied with the idea of monumental sculpture, the monument. He may have had personal reasons as well, perhaps the death of his brothers or an awareness of what World War II had done to people. He never lost the memorial dimension of art from his artistic viewpoint. It seems that he was trained that way. We had artists such

as **Ivan Meštrović** or **Kršinić** before him, and that sort of artistic vocation was the one to strike roots here, so that apparently **Bakić** felt a profound urge to mirror himself in that tradition. Abandoning that in order to produce forms that involved him with the current avant-garde of the 60s was the consequence of that profound feeling of artistic vocation, which saw the sculptor as someone that primarily created monumental and memorial forms.

WHW: That part of his opus has often been characterized as ideologically cleansed and empty, as pure modernism that is, contrary to social realism, understood as being above all ideology. How do you perceive **Bakić's** ideological position?

Denegri: I have an impression that **Bakić**, even though he also created in the manner of social realism [I am coming back to the portrait of poet **Ivan Goran Kovačić**, where neither the tragic fate of the protagonist nor the design indicate ideologically motivated art], never went in the direction of glorifying the political system or the prevailing ideology. It was due to his instinct and his feeling for motifs. In my opinion, **Bakić** would have been the last to serve an ideology. It seems that monumental sculpture was his artistic and even human vocation, which is why I wouldn't like to view him in the same context as the numerous examples of monuments scattered all over former Yugoslavia. Even Monument to **Stjepan Filipović** in Valjevo is no exception. Why can't an artist have such an instinct? Certainly he can. It is not necessary that everyone – especially that generation, with that sort of life experience – should be avant-garde in the same sense as the *New Tendencies* used to be.

WHW: How traumatic was the shift away from monumental sculpture that was still marked by a realist or social-realist key, and towards the abstraction?

Denegri: The **Marx** and **Engels** monument was itself a reduction. It is hard to say whether it is a good sculpture, but it certainly is a reduction, escaping common description. The same goes for Monument to **Stjepan Filipović**, which is also a reduced figure. **Bakić** was obviously reflecting on the question of how one should treat figurative sculpture in his time. It presupposed considerable reduction of form and figure, in accordance with the principles of abstract art, or rather that sort of figurative art he apparently

stood close to with his bull sculptures. That means we have a reference, but the sculptural tasks have priority with respect to the descriptive ones. Perhaps **Bakić** hoped that he would not have to dispose of the model, but rather treat it in a way that rejected the narratives that were typical for social realism and various other types of realism, utterly committed to the subject.

WHW: How do you account for the fact that the system tolerated that sort of experimentation on the level of monument, which was, after all, extremely official art?

Denegri: I think it was not only **Bakić** that was, so to say, tolerated. There were others, such as **Dušan Džamonja**. It is a huge question about the character and type of modernism that evolved in Yugoslavia after the social-realist period. To be sure, the function of art as a collective symbol was still there. It was before the phenomena like **Josip Vaništa**, before that defensive, enclosed attitude, before all that talk about nihilism and alienation. That would be a very broad debate, which should take into account what sort of modernism it was and which were its top achievements in the period after the rejection of social realism. On the one hand, it was a soft type of modernism, which somehow dominated the scene with its diluted modernist paradigm, with a quantitatively widespread type of modern painting or sculpture that no longer had any driving force. On the other hand, the above-mentioned artists were authentic artists that had taken upon themselves collective tasks. Even in the atmosphere of the 50s, before disappointment with the general political and economic trend had become evident, the sustaining energy that pulled the generation forward was absolutely positive. It was dominated by the conviction that it was necessary to build up society, to improve the



▲ **Bakić** in garden of his studio, photo: **Tošo Dabac**

lives and the environment, which I consider to be positive projections rather than going with the grain. Perhaps someone might think that it was an utterly totalitarian political system and that everyone was included in its broad perimeter, but such an extreme position brings all this into question. There is another approach, which may be more realistic. People lived their lives in those times, they had their emotions, their memories, their visions of the present and the future, and they were far from empty. Perhaps someone had a reason for plunging himself into his intimacy and solitude in order to draw some great artistic attitude from there. However, I wouldn't say in advance that someone working like **Bakić** automatically worked for the system or that he was manipulated by it. The question is who constituted that system; perhaps it consisted of small, progressive groups that also wanted to improve their environment. And if a monument to the victims of war was to be done, then it was done in a way that suited the modern idea of sculpture, rather than one that was anachronistic as such. We can see a similar case, albeit in an entirely different manner, in **Olga Jevrić**, a Belgrade artist that never came to produce a monumental sculpture, but her clumps of matter were truly petrified or materialized screams, monuments to the victims of war rather than its victors. Artists had a genuine attitude towards these victims and it was the right emotion, not an emotion meant to consecrate a regime

with a particular political figure as its head, which I do not wish to discuss now.

WHW: What do you think of the present reception of Bakić and the state of his legacy?

Denegri: I am not well acquainted with that problem. The fact that **Tonko Maroević** has published a monograph on his work is a sign in itself. However, it would certainly be extremely important to conduct a thorough research and to organize a large exhibition, as he deserves it, now that the museum is opening its doors... I doubt that anyone could do it better than our central institution, especially because, if we are really indebted to **Bakić**, we should act accordingly, and we should be quick and serious about it. I think that, should



▲ **Bakić** in garden of his studio, photo: **Tošo Dabac**



we manage to do that, a great figure of this culture would shine forth, not just in visual arts or sculpture. But I also believe that in the local memory, especially of the generation that stands close to his work, there is no doubt whatsoever about its value, regardless of whether he is discussed in the media at the moment or not, and whether his legacy is given sufficient attention. His work is appreciated, known, esteemed... Not everything has been done in this respect, but something is more than nothing. ★

Zagreb, May 2007

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The magic of all things is adventure, the quest, that's what it means to be human. It is easy to walk a well-trodden path, but it is far from dangerous and therefore far from interesting.

Omladinski tjednik, 1975

To venture into the unknown and to realize something that hasn't existed before – that is called passion. There is game in it, but it's me who is defining its rules and the basic requirement is to obey them. People may say that it isn't sculpture at all – for me, that is irrelevant. I am doing the same thing that I did when I was working with volume.

Start magazine, 1975

In atelier, photo: Tošo Dabac ►





vojin bakić





im Palais Thinnfeld
Mariahilferstraße 2 ★ Graz ★ Austria

vojin bakić

4.6 – 24.8.2008.

curated by: **Ana Bakić & What, How and for Whom / WHW**

[Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, Sabina Sabolović]

WHW especially thanks the following institutions and individuals
for their kind help in providing us material and documentation used
in this publication:

Bakić family

Archive for visual arts HAZU

Archive Tošo Dabac / Museum of Contemporary Art / City
of Zagreb

Croatian Radio Television

Marija Gattin

Institute for Contemporary Art

Ivan Picelj

thanks to: **Jerko Denegri ★ Anne Faucheret ★ Sören
Grammel ★ Snješka Knežević ★ Ljiljana Kolečnik ★ Vesna
Šiprak Sabolović ★ Alan Vlahov** and especially **Bakić family**

the exhibition and publication were made possible by:

City Office for Culture, Education & Sport of City of Zagreb

City of Graz

State of Steiermark

Federal Ministry for Education & Art, Austria

Erste Bank

SLE Schuh GmbH





◀ Monument on
Petrova gora,
summer 2007

This publication has been released
on the occasion of the **Vojin
Bakić** exhibition at the **Grazer
Kunstverein**

publishers:
What, How and for Whom/WHW
B. Trenka 4 ★ Zagreb
whw@mi2.hr

Grazer Kunstverein
im Palais Thinnfeld
Mariahilferstraße 2 ★ Graz

editors: **What, How and for
Whom/WHW**
translation: **Marina Miladinovc ★
Edo Bosnar/Ljubo Lasić**
proofreading: **Susan Jakopec**

photographs: **Tošo Dabac ★
Nenad Gattin ★ Bakić family
archive ★ Dejan Kršić ★ Ivan
Picelj ★ Erhard Wehrmann**

book constructor: **Dejan Kršić**
font: **H&FJ Verlag ★ Bodoni Poster**
paper: **Munken Print Cream**
115 g/m² ★ **Plike Black 150 g/m²**
printed by: **GIPA ★ Zagreb**
print run: 700
June 2008 ★ Zagreb/Graz



▲ Monument on
Petrova gora,
summer 2007

