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Claiming the wall: How memorial plaques reshape urban landscapes in Russia

Стены памяти и протеста: Как мемориальные доски преобразуют городские ландшафты в России

Abstract. This article explores the significance of memorial plaques in Russian cities as sites of history, memory and aesthetics that create a new sensorium of the urban sphere. The plaques, affixed to historic buildings, serve as tangible markers that commemorate significant events and figures from the past. Taking the case of the historic center of St. Petersburg, the article examines how these plaques create a sense of historicity and contribute to the formation of a shared cultural background within the urban sphere. The plaques evolve from simple inscriptions to more elaborate and visually appealing designs. It also highlights the controversies surrounding the selection of individuals to be materialized and remembered and the aesthetic concerns raised by some residents. Meanwhile, the two contemporary projects challenge traditional commemorative practices and their aesthetics: Last Address, which commemorates victims of political repression through individualized plaques, and the Gandhi artist group's street art interventions. These projects offer alternative approaches to memorialization and engage in dialogue with existing monuments and plaques. These micro-interventions show grassroots resistance within memorializing practices and aesthetics. The article emphasizes the contested nature of public space and the role of memorial plaques in shaping collective memory and historical narratives in Russian cities.

Keywords: memorial plaques, memory, history, street art, urban intervention, critical fabulation, contested site, Last Address, Memorial

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Introduction

Walls have always been sites contested for their utility in socio-political and artistic practices, as individuals and communities compete for the right to claim these surfaces as platforms for the deliberate arrangement of historical narratives and memories. Since ancient times they have been readily accessible surfaces for

a wide public in towns and cities. They serve not only as boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, but also constitute flat-surface media for inscriptions, signs and drawings. Inscriptions of various kinds mark the city, ranging from official municipal signs to graffiti. Among them, memorial plaques, dedicated to historic figures and events, made of lasting materials like bronze and stone, evoke a historical aura in the urban sphere, conveying a specific sensorium of the city to the community through the materialized form of memory and history.

The plaques on historic buildings are site-specific memories: affixed to the wall, they are evidence of the lingering presence of the past, letting the mute building speak. In form and content, the plaques resemble cemetery plaques, but functionally they diverge. Cemetery plaques commemorate the vanity of human beings by referencing the bodies under gravestones, bodies that have already turned into soil and gravestones covered with vegetation that attests to the flow of time. By contrast, the plaques affirm the long empirical existence of the site and the buildings: the plaques reinforce the material authenticity of the city fabric. Inscriptions and walls together replace the now non-existent bodies that once occupied the place; they enhance an intimate bond between abstract historic figures and contemporary human beings. In this sense, they not only increase the informational density of the physical space, but also augment shared sentiments and high pride among the community. In this vein, plaques contribute to the creation of a specific sensible world signaling the presence of urban narratives.

The plaques can present as *lieux de mémoire*, a concept developed by French historian Pierre Nora. As sites where memory resides, *lieux de mémoire* are associated with a sense of rupture with the past and a rift in memory, leading to the emergence of sites that embody “a residual sense of continuity” (Nora 1). Nora takes memory and history as oppositional terms: while memory is “life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened”, history is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete” (Nora 3); *Lieux de mémoire* are created by the “interaction between memory and history” and most importantly, “a will to remember” (Nora 14). The plaques that reside in everyday space, anchored in concrete buildings in a rapid-changing society, function as a reminder of the past, investing them with a historic aura; they are “the commemorative practices that offset the losses of time, telling stories that such plaques literally inscribe upon the cityscape” (Buckler 53).

This article explores the intricate relationship shared by urban spaces, memory, and artistic expression. In doing so, it delves into the multifaceted role that memorial plaques assume as tangible markers of time. These plaques are revealed

not only as preservers of the past but also as active shapers of the city's narrative. Simultaneously, they affirm the contested nature of urban space and history, often manipulated by prevailing power structures and social controls. Through an examination of contemporary urban interventions in a dialogue with the tradition, the paper raises a question not only the act of memorialization but also the very process of telling history within the urban sphere.

Whom to memorialize on the wall: Walls as contested sites

In Russia, memorial plaques first appeared in the 1700s, but gained widespread popularity in the Soviet years¹. They are easily spotted in the old city centers, in particular the historic center of St. Petersburg where many historic buildings remained undemolished: in some cases, one whole façade is filled with plaques from different periods of time. The old plaques feature minimal information to define the space located behind the wall, such as “in this house, January 29, 1837, Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin died” or “Petr Il’ich Tchaikovsky was born in 25 April 1840 in Votkinsk in Viatskii Governorate and died in this house 25 October 1893”. Such simple inscriptions require cultural background, shared by the community, for readers to fill in the omitted information of who Pushkin or Tchaikovsky is. This shared cultural understanding fosters a sense of community among residents, turning the sites of plaques into not only historic locations but also repositories of local connections, functioning as *lieux de mémoire*.

While old plaques report simple information, relatively new plaques are inscribed with verbal and pictorial descriptions: The plaques constructed in the post-Soviet decades are dedicated to diverse figures in various fields from throughout Russo-Soviet history, as well as figures who are not typically included in the shared cultural background. Therefore, they differ in their contents and length; the text supplements the non-existent cultural background for viewers: the sentences have become longer and the information has become denser in order to introduce the widely unknown figure. They frequently use epithets, such as “great” or “brilliant,” and more details to portray the dedicatee. At the same time, many of these plaques are liberated from conventional rectangular frames and include bas-reliefs of portraits, profiles, and decorative details that can help viewers to grasp to whom the plaque is dedicated

¹ The first plaques in Russia date back to the second half of the eighteenth century, documenting the flood: some of them can be found in the Peter and Paul Fortress, St. Petersburg, which were established in 1752, 1777, and 1788. For the history and transformation of memorial plaques, see Besedina and Burkova. Also, the city of St. Petersburg has an online encyclopedia that catalogs the authorized plaques, arranged in an alphabetical order: www.encspb.ru/object/2805516545?d-v=2853872336&lc=ru.

(Figure 1). Sometimes they seem to compete with one another in regard to their aesthetic qualities, rather than the historical importance of what they depict. In this vein, instead of serving as informative signs of history or commemorative sites for community bonds, the plaques that are dedicated to figures outside of shared consciousness function as aesthetic objects; their commemorative functions are limited to the small group of people who knew the figures in their lifetimes.



Figure 1. Commemorative plaques with decorative details (right: plaque dedicated to painter Samokhvalov; left: plaque dedicated to the ballerina Ulanova)

Contemporary plaques do not always perform their aesthetic function well. Some plaques are regarded as a kind of visual intrusion, marring the urban atmosphere with their poor aesthetics or their illegal status, as in the case of a plaque dedicated to the chair of the general directorate for the Construction of the Western Regions Glukhovskii, which appeared in 2006 (Dima, electronic source): the plaque contains his bas-relief, talking to the phone in a typical Soviet officer's pose. Not only was it ugly, and not only was his status as a chairman of a local organization that nobody acknowledges unworthy of commemoration, but his plaque was installed in violation of the 2005 municipal law in St. Petersburg².

² See *Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva Sankt-Peterburga ot 17.01.2005 No. 2 "O Memorial'nykh doskakh v Sankt-Peterburge"* at <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/8405108>.

Only authorized names are allowed to be fixed on the wall. The law enacted in 2005 restricts not only the list of appropriate historic figures to dedicate plaques to, but also the sites themselves. They are allowed only on those historic buildings that maintain their visual and physical features from the historical period. In this sense, like any other memorials in the public space, the plaques explicitly demonstrate how the city authorities define and display city history.

Though the government authorizes names and sites, that does not imply that the public space of walls is devoid of contestation. The proliferation of plaques often results in diverse historic figures from diverse periods of time coexisting on the same surfaces, thereby creating intersecting ideologies and interpretations of history. The commemoration practices are subject to not only legal control but also the common sentiments of the community; unsuitable inscriptions in terms of sentiment and aesthetics are kept at bay through the shared values and preferences of the community. The clash of different opinions among individuals and communities becomes apparent in these practices of control.

For instance, commemoration of the turbulent years, such as the Civil War and the Stalinist purges, historical judgment remained controversial, intensifying in the 2010s. The plaques for figures like Admiral Kolchak, who served in the White Army during the Civil War, Karl Mannerheim, who was associated with the Leningrad Siege during WWII, and even Stalin himself, exemplify these conflicts. Kolchak's plaque, initiated by the historical center Beloe Delo, faced opposition from activists of the Russian Socialist Movement, resulting in the installation of an alternative plaque labeling him a "military criminal and hangman" (Vol'tskaâ, electronic source). While Kolchak's plaque initially received legal permission, a court later ordered its removal, recognizing him as a perpetrator of political repression. On the other hand, the memorial to Mannerheim generated controversy across various groups, irrespective of their ideological stances. Mannerheim's involvement in the Leningrad Siege during WWII, fighting alongside Nazi Germany, led to its dismantling and relocation to a museum after facing frequent vandalism, despite then-Minister of Culture Medinsky's attempt to justify it as a memorial to a WWI hero and a means to reconcile societal divisions („Medinskij nazval Mannergejma...”, electronic source)³.

The ever-expanding list of historically eclectic plaques evokes worries regarding the appropriation of historical walls by specific institutions and authorities who are attempting to impose particular interpretations of history and memories upon the urban landscape. It also raises concerns about the city center potentially turning into a cemetery adorned with the names of both well-known and less-

³ Allegedly, it was a friendly gesture to Finland, initiated by a top official.

er-known deceased figures. Meanwhile, two contemporary projects, Last Address, an (inter)national project spanning Russian and post-Soviet cities, and “Here Simply Lived a Person” by the Gandhi artist group in St. Petersburg, challenge the very concept of such commemorative practices and imposing history. These projects are anti-monumental in terms of their subjects, forms, and meanings: they are involved in dialogic relations to the traditional plaques introduced in the beginning of the article⁴.

Memorial for individuals: Last address

In 2015, in collaboration with Memorial, Russian journalist Sergey Parkhomenko introduced the Last Address project, anti-monumental plaques dedicated to victims of Soviet repression⁵. These plaques shed light on the uncomfortable past of political purges and their victims who were shot or perished in gulags under the Soviet authoritarian regime, predominantly during the Stalinist years.

Human rights organizations, including Memorial, have endeavored to establish official monuments dedicated to the commemoration and mourning of the victims, exemplified by the Solovetsky Stones that Memorial has been installing

⁴ Anti-monuments or counter-monuments challenge and subvert the established conventions of traditional monuments, including their subjects, forms, locations, visitor experiences, and significances. This implies the potential for a wide spectrum of anti-monuments. They primarily evolved as attempts to create an appropriate model for memorials dedicated to victims, particularly those of the Holocaust, as a critical response to fascistic monuments: the most well-known examples include Esther Shalevgerz’s Hamburg Monument against Fascism and Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial. These two memorials evoke distinct viewer experiences. For instance, Hamburg’s twelve-meter-tall pillar, initially a canvas for memorial graffiti, was gradually lowered into the ground until it disappeared. This act of self-destruction symbolizes a challenge to the concept of monumentality and raises doubts about enduring remembrance. On the other hand, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial consists of a black marble wall formed in a “v” shape on the ground like a scar. The wall, where the names of fallen veterans are inscribed chronologically, invites individuals to observe their own reflections as they walk along the memorial. This combination poses questions about contested memories about the tragic war and its violence.

⁵ The Memorial organization is an international human rights organization that was founded in Russia and was also a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022. Playing a substantial role in revealing and publicizing the political repression in the Soviet years, the organization has maintained a database of over 2.6 million victims. This greatly helped the Last Address project in verifying victims. Furthermore, it has been actively involved in advocating for the rights of migrants from non-Russian ethnic backgrounds, including the Roma community, as well as supporting activists who oppose the Putin government. Due to its critical stance towards the current government, the organization faced a setback in 2022 when a Russian court ordered its closure under the country’s controversial foreign agent legislation.

in several cities since 1989, including Moscow⁶. Initially, the Putin government merely exhibited reluctance to commemorate these political victims. However, in the late 2010s, with the rise of conservatism and nationalism, it adopted a more assertive stance against these commemorative practices. Despite these challenges, the persistent efforts of human rights organizations culminated in the creation of the Wall of Grief, the first national monument erected in 2017⁷.

Yet the individual names of victims were never acknowledged; that was considered information data to be looked up in a long list of archival documents. They were memorialized only collectively and anonymously. In contrast to the anonymity of the two monuments, the Last Address plaques take a centrifugal approach by individually dedicating each plaque to a victim, thereby reinstating their names and bios on the wall.

According to Parkhomenko's interview, this project drew inspiration from Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine or "Stumbling Stones", which are concrete cubes with brass plates commemorating victims of National Socialism, especially the Holocaust⁸. Unlike this German project that places markers on the streets, the prevailing weather conditions and extensive construction activities in major Russian cities led to the decision to relocate the new commemorative signs onto walls. Rather than the prison or concentration camp, where memorials have been commonly erected in Russia, these memorial plaques indicate the private place where victims originally belonged to⁹. They are installed on the building where they lived before their arrests, mostly at the request of victims' relatives; but not only victims, but also neighbors or local residents who want to commemorate the trag-

⁶ The Memorial website provides the information on the attempts to create the monument since 1987. See project.memo.ru/.

⁷ Wall of Grief is the first monument, authorized by the presidential decree, and is partially funded by the Moscow government. President Putin attended the opening ceremony. While some civic organizations received it as an achievement that placed a mark on the city of Moscow, many criticized the government for hypocrisy in the official move, viewing it as a disguise for political repression by reducing it to something that occurred merely in the past and not during Putin's presidency (MacFarquhar; Vološina). In contrast, the Solovetsky Stones were installed by the civic organization Memorial: Solovetsky Stone in Moscow was installed in 1989, which is followed by Arkhangelsk one in 1992 and St. Petersburg one in 2002.

⁸ For detailed understanding of the explanation of the initiative of the Last Address project, read Parkhomenko's interview in Batalina, *Sergej Parhomenko: "Poslednij adres". Vremâ sobirat' kamni* and "*Poslednij adres*": *komu nužna pamât' o neizvestnyh žertvah represij?*. In addition, regarding *Stolpersteine*, this German project has been extensively examined in numerous scholarly publications across the fields of memory studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and urban studies. For publication in English, see Östman, Harjas, and Gould and Silverman.

⁹ In Uta Franke's interview with Demnig, the artist explained that the Stolpersteine project "operate centrifugally" to the victims' places of everyday lives and allows victims to "get its name back" (Demnig 9, 13).

edy that happened in that space. Each victim receives one memorial: a 10 x 17 cm plaque, designed by the Russian architect Aleksandr Brodsky (Figure 2). It contains simple biographical information, beginning with “here lived”, followed by the individual’s name, profession, date of birth, arrest, death, and rehabilitation.

In this sense, the Last Address project engages in dialogue with traditional plaques, creating an aesthetical and narrative continuity in the urban sphere. While differentiated by their size and material, these small plaques mime the narrative and aesthetics of the traditional plaques, in terms of subjects, site specificity, and meanings. The plaques do not depersonalize victims as faceless and nameless figures: they are no longer an anonymous collective represented by a large memorial or museum display. They bring their names out of the archive or database into the urban sphere by adapting the traditional urban aesthetics to mourning practices. The project initiative holds particular significance as it serves to commemorate political victims and brings their existence to the forefront of the urban sphere, paralleling the recognition bestowed upon authority figures for their notable achievements and acknowledgement by other authorities.

Therefore, it creates a different visitor experience and thus, alternative historical sensorium. The material evidence of the past not only shows the omnipresence of victims in the physical space, but also signifies the ethical burden on residents and society. Owing to their diminutive size, the alternative plaques avoid the legal processes imposed on traditional memorial plaques. Instead, functioning as informational signs, they require approval from residents or owners of buildings. Also, these plaques are affixed to the walls located within the zones of semi-private and semi-public spaces, such as courtyards or beneath the arches, effectively creating a memorial space bridging the realms of public and private. Consequently, residents cannot overlook their presence, although these plaques bear the individual names and memories that often remain absent from mainstream historical narratives. The Last Address creates an alternative memory map and reshapes the city’s local history on its fabric, transforming these sites into *lieux de mémoire*. The project’s significance lies in the act of installation and preservation itself, serving as a unifying force that forges connections between the past and the present, as emphasized by Parkhomenko in his interview. Its broader mission aims at creating a sense of “community” among local residents, activists, and the individuals from the past who perished without traces (*Sergej Parhomenko: “Poslednij adres”. Vremâ sobirat’ kamni*, electronic source).

However, passers-by without specific connections to the sites of these plaques may not have similar responses when reading them. For some, the Last Address plaques may appear as mere names within the index of a historical document. In contrast, the plaques dedicated to figures like Tchaikovsky and Pushkin can evoke stronger emotional connections since most people are familiar with their works or

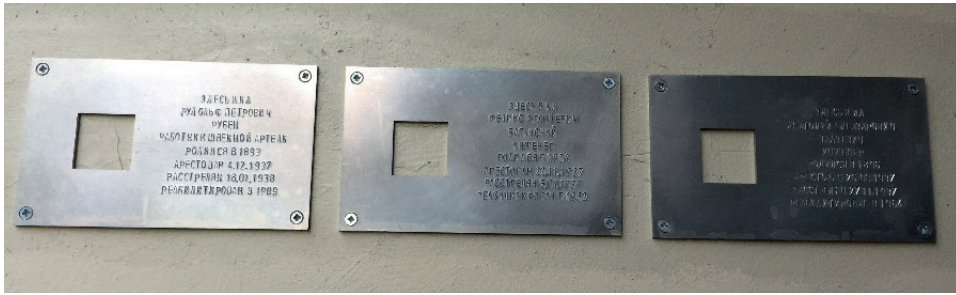


Figure 2. Last address plaques dedicated to the victims of the political repression

biographical details, readily available through media and educational institutions. This discrepancy in emotional response underlines how the urban environment reflects voices of the authorities in determining how history is interpreted and who is memorialized.

The urban landscape seeks to transform into a text, historical narrative, with everyday walls serving as easily accessible canvases adorned with numerous biographies – some leaving enduring materialized memories while others fade without names. It does not mean that the city needs to encapsulate the entirety of history, listing all the names of the deceased on the wall. But the Last Address project endeavors to exhibit the past which is erased, silenced, and forgotten by returning their names and marking where they once lived. This endeavor includes addressing the violence imposed by authorities through the selection and representation of memories and history within public space. The alternative plaques help construct stories from the ruins of the past, offering a more comprehensive view of an unrecoverable past. In this sense, the project disrupts the hierarchy of urban memories and challenges the existing power structure that determines whose names are displayed on walls, representing a new form of anti-monumental memorialization and counter-historical practice.

Acknowledging the impossibility of restoring a complete picture of history, these plaques provide mere traces. They feature a vacant square, originally intended for photographs, now evoking imaginations of specific individuals associated with the profession that occupied the site. The gaps in information, unmarked on the plaques, invite readers and passers-by to paint a fuller picture of the urban history. Unlike Pushkin and Tchaikovsky, whose omitted details can be easily filled in due to their shared cultural background, here, the omitted information relies on imagination and empathy to complete the narrative.

The Last Address project is an attempt to negotiate the past from the present, not only fighting against widespread indifference to and amnesia of the dark past in contemporary society, but also bringing mourning practices to everyday space

and a broader audience as *lieux de mémoire*. The plaques affect the mental mapping of local history by attesting to the simple fact that not only well-known great figures but also ordinary people, including victims, inhabited the same space. They reveal the dark past and present alternative history, separate from books and documents. Their intrusion in everyday space disrupts the specific, historical sensorium of the urban sphere created by the authorities and change people's sentiments toward their local history.

Imaging the ordinary people: Gandhi

The street art project conducted by the former activist group Gandhi, based in St. Petersburg, introduces another layer of urban narratives through the creation of fake plaques. Street art is an "assertion, a competition, for visibility; urban public space is always a competition for power by managing the power of visibility" (Irvine 249). It operates independently of official validation or legalization, and is increasingly recognized as both an art genre and a form of activism challenging urban policies and capitalism. Street art, encompassing graffiti and cultural jamming (like adding slogans to billboards and altering advertising to subvert their intended messages), highlights the power dynamics and meanings entrenched within the urban environment. Artists attempt to de-naturalize the taken-for-granted landscapes that people use on a daily basis, asking us to be aware of the power relations that work through this mundane space (Cresswell 1996). Their work encourages spectators to engage with a place's identity, history, and memory in novel and transformative ways.

Street art plays a particularly significant role in Russia, where societal control and conservatism witnessed a notable surge throughout the 2010s, culminating in the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and an environment where "art interventions had replaced the public political sphere" (Jonson 159). Russian performance art as a form of protest drew substantial media coverage and scholarly attention in the Western world¹⁰. For instance, in 2010 the protest group Voina famously painted a giant phallus on the surface of the Liteinyi drawbridge, which leads to the headquarters of the FSB building in St. Petersburg. Additionally, the rock performance known as "Punk Prayer", staged inside the Christ the Savior Cathedral by Pussy Riot, a group that evolved from Voina, caused a sensational scandal on the eve of Putin's third-term election in February 2012.

¹⁰ See for the Russian radical art movement in the 2000s and early 2010s: Johnson, Dziewanska et al.

In contrast to these performance's that created shocking visual intrusions and following scandals, Gandhi was a group that engaged in micro-urban interventions in the middle of 2010s. The group was named after Mahatma Gandhi and took a position of non-violent resistance through art in the street. Beginning with simple images of animals, the group then produced a series of migrant women in their national costumes and a series of "women in the streets", which make a socially-oriented message about racism and misogyny. Street art pieces, such as "Not a Shame", "I Will Be Soon Wiped Out, What About You?" and "Women in Work" expose the fragile situation of women, fighting against sexism, misogyny and racism. "Not a Shame" portrays a woman's sanitary pad with a red inscription: "Not a Shame". "I Will Be Soon Wiped Out, What About You?" presents a naked woman smoking a cigarette, engaging passers-by in a provocative dialogue: her conversation symbolizes the precarious nature of graffiti, destined to be erased, much like the fragile social status of women. Lastly, "Women in Work" adorns a passageway column, featuring a migrant woman in a white hijab cleaning the road. This image highlights an often-overlooked labor force that is destined to fade away, paralleling the impermanence of street art.

Furthermore, the group collaborated with the project *Nochlezhka*, an organization to give aid to the homeless, to put up hundreds of plaques made of cardboard. This initiative aimed to expose the harsh reality of poverty in the second largest city in Russia while also raising funds for the homeless, a goal that was successfully achieved. They used specifically cardboard for the plaques since it is one of the most significant materials for the survival of the homeless (Figure 3).

The project "Here Simply Lived a Person" took place in May 2014 as a collaboration with Anna Nazarova from the Dlinavolny group, involving the installation of temporary plywood plaques as an urban intervention. These plaques were installed overnight throughout the historic center. Each plaque featured information about ordinary individuals or anti-heroes who could easily be found in any neighborhood. Their problems and situations resonated with many passers-by in the city, ranging from simple anecdotes to social commentaries on local and national issues. Each plaque reads:

In this house in 2004, Ivan Semenov came to visit Olga Chikineva and accidentally broke a sink in the bathroom (Muchnoi pereulok 3).

In this house in 2009, the Korzhikov and Zakharzhevskii couples rented an apartment. Then, they quarreled over the missing yogurt in the refrigerator and left (Pushkinskaia 7).

In this house in 2009 lived Ksenia Dimina. She often woke up late to work, because she loved to read online forums at night. In 2013, she moved to Grazhdanka, closer to the office (Prospect Bakunin 15–17).

In this house from 2000 to 2003 the son of FSB officer, Andrei Vasil'evich Chebakov, came to visit his girlfriend, discussing the possibility of moving to Moscow and photos of Kirsten

Dunst. But at the end of 2003, the girlfriend got married and stop inviting friends (Lomonosov 20).

In this house on 12 September 2007 happened the conception of Gul'nara Akhmetovna Shakonova, who, however, never lived [here], because she left for Kazakhstan while in the mother's womb (Apraksin pereulok 9).

In this house from 1999 to 2004 Vladislav Andreevich Sergienko, PR director of the firm „El-lada”, rented the apartment, staying in the house only at nights, and all the time was dedicated to work. In the beginning of 2004, he met a girl Natal'ia and moved in with her (7-aia Krasnoarmeiskaia 19).

In this house in 2006 from June to December lived a musician from the group ‘White Bim’, Valera Subbotin and Tania Buzina, who could not get along with the owner because of noise and smoking, and moved to the Narvskoi region (Rubinshtein 21).

In this house from 1974 to 2009 lived Aleksandra Stepanovna Beleinik, accountant and gardener, but having retired, moved to her son in Tolyatti to babysit the grandchildren (Pisareva 5).

In this house from 2008 to 2010 lived and worked copywriter Valentina Sergeevna Koshkina, but, after making a decision to end loneliness, she found a husband online and moved to Toronto (9-aia Sovetskaia 22).

In this house lived Ivan Borodin since 2003. In 2010, he inherited an apartment in Moscow and went to live in India, Thailand and China (Bol'shoi Kazachii pereulok 11).

In this house from 2001 to 2005 Natal'ia and Aleksandr Suvorovs rented a room. But, after giving a birth to a daughter Mariia, they had to look for a separate apartment, which does not exist in the center (Gorokhovaia 50).

At the second entrance of this house in March 2007, Vasilii Ivanovich Kabakov confessed his love, but was rejected and drank cognac all night, spending all the remaining money until payday (Kolomenskaia 9).

The fake plaques parody the contents and forms of classic plaques, reappropriating their rhetoric of “Here Lived”. In continuation of their artworks on the marginalized, such as women and migrants, these works expose ordinary people with petty or too-common problems and thus unrecognized in the urban sphere. These artworks reveal that the city is not solely inhabited by historical figures but also by contemporary anti-heroes. Importantly, the biographies of these anti-heroes remain incomplete within the text: the inscriptions on the plaque do not mean these anti-heroes' temporalities are completed. The city can be viewed as a novel in progress, as a “genre-in-the-making”, with each plaque representing an open-ended narrative (Bakhtin 50). This is different from traditional plaques, which are more epic in nature, whose form is already completed. The fake plaques reflect the never-completed text, ever-incomplete narrative of the urban history.

In this vein, this street art invokes Sadiya Hartman's notion of “critical fabulation” to elucidate the transformative power of imagination in shaping a more comprehensive understanding of history. Much like Hartman's concept, Gandhi's artistic interventions embody the act of reimagining and reconfiguring historical narratives, crafting counter-histories that transcend the limitations of archival records and the restricted perspectives of archives. Hartman's argument, as illuminated by her example of Venus, an enslaved woman reduced to mere commodity



Figure 3. Cardboard plaque for Nozhlezhka project

or lifeless figure in archival documents, exposes the inherent inadequacy of historical archives and factual evidence in capturing the nuanced lives of marginalized individuals. “Critical fabulation”, as she proposes, allows us to transcend these limitations by crafting stories that elude the grasp of limited viewpoints and sparse records¹¹. In a parallel manner, Gandhi’s street art seeks to depict the lives of the unrecognized and the forgotten, challenging the power dynamics that have marginalized, silenced, and erased their stories.

But Gandhi’s artistic endeavor does not aim to claim the status of history itself, as Hartman emphasizes that counter-histories cannot simply “install themselves as a history”. Instead, much like “critical fabulation”, it aspires to paint a fuller picture of the city’s narrative tapestry, one that includes the everyday moments and individuals who are often overlooked and dismissed. In this pursuit, it not only disrupts the established hierarchy of memorials but also prompts a reevalu-

¹¹ While acknowledging the transformative potential of imagination in shaping a more comprehensive understanding of history, it is crucial to clarify that the intention here is not to equate the experiences of enslaved girls in the Atlantic trade with those of ordinary people in the 21st century, whose voices simply go unrecorded and unrecognized as part of marginalized narratives. Such a comparison risks oversimplifying the deeply troubling history of slavery and perpetrating a form of narrative violence. Instead, the emphasis lies on highlighting the methodology employed to describe aspects of history that remain absent from official historical records.

ation of memorialization practices. Through these fictitious yet imaginative narratives, spectators are invited to engage in the act of painting a more complete portrait of the city, one that transcends the confines of traditional historical accounts.

However, it is worth noting that these plywood plaques engage with fleeting narratives, akin to fictitious memories, destined to fade away much like the plywood plaques themselves. Similar to many other forms of street art, the plywood plaques embrace ephemerality, rendering them vulnerable compared to more enduring forms like graffiti or paintings, which require repainting. The project had a short life-expectancy in the public sphere. For instance, one plaque dedicated to a musician, located on Rubinshtein Street, one of the city's busiest streets, filled with fancy restaurants and bars, disappeared and was nowhere to be found immediately after its nocturnal installation. In contrast, another plaque commemorating the son of the FSB officer inside the courtyard at Lomonosov Street was the last to disappear, surviving until 2015.

Above all, as the artists articulated in Facebook commentaries on the project, viewers could not tell whether these anecdotes were real or fake. They talk about common problems, but are impossible to verify based only on the texts. How much faith, then, could viewers put in inscribed texts of the authorized plaques, which have become collective memories in materialized, durable form in public space? Viewers are left to grapple with the authenticity of the anecdotes presented on the plaques, prompting them to question the essence of memorialization in public spaces. The uncertainty surrounding the veracity of these narratives disrupts the conventional understanding of commemoration, emphasizing that not all stories are easily categorized as historical fact or fiction. This sense of ambiguity adds another layer to the project's mission of challenging established power dynamics in the city's narrative.

In a city where power, order, and rebellion constantly vie for dominance, the alternative plywood projects orchestrated by Gandhi emerge as powerful disruptors of established narratives and aesthetics. As Tim Cresswell aptly noted, the street is a battleground "as a site and sign of domination and order" and "as a site and sign of unrest, rebellion and disorder" (Cresswell 2006: 262). Gandhi's work becomes a catalyst for critical reflection, challenging the hegemonic forces that seek to control public spaces and the collective memory they represent. Through the removal of the conventional and revered aura that is commonly attributed to traditional approaches of inscription and remembrance on wall, this project questions the authority and reliability of authorized plaques, compelling viewers to scrutinize how collective memory is constructed in materialized and durable forms in public space.

This initiative represents a distinctive facet of urban art and grassroots resistance, resounding in the socio-political climate of the 2010s in Russia. As they

disrupt prevailing narratives and lay bare the contested nature of public space, these small yet impactful interventions acquire even greater significance and demand our remembrance. Though this project may be a fleeting moment in the urban fabric of Russia, it serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring power embedded in alternative narratives and artistic interventions. In the urban landscapes, where the limits of acceptable expression may change, the documentation and analysis of such projects become vital in preserving and understanding the complexities of urban conflict and artistic resistance for the future.

Conclusion

Various narratives unfold in the urban sphere, including memories of a dark past that were censored from sanitized history and are now slipping into amnesia. The plaques serve as tangible markers of these narratives, contributing to the formation of a shared cultural background within the urban sphere. Simultaneously, they expose epistemological conflicts inherent in public space and unresolved ideological feuds due to the socio-political situation in post-Soviet Russia. While exploring the evolution of these plaques and the controversies surrounding their selection and aesthetics, the paper mainly deals with the two projects: the Last Address plaques unsettle urban traditions and hierarchies of memory by inscribing silenced and forgotten history into the urban sphere, emphasizing the traditional purpose and meaning of memorials. On the other hand, Gandhi's plaques intend to raise questions about the practices of memorialization and the act of writing history within the urban sphere.

Considering the current socio-political circumstances, characterized by tightened societal control after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the significance of micro-interventions like these plaque installations may be overshadowed. In 2015, the Gandhi group altered their Facebook page name to Gadina (“viper, jerk, riff-raff”), signifying a shift away from non-violence due to the heightened socio-political tensions that followed the annexation of Crimea in 2014, tensions which persisted through the late 2010s. Nevertheless, as of 2023, when the group's page is no longer accessible, it remains crucial to remember that these peaceful urban conflicts and dynamics once thrived in Russian cities, serving as enduring reminders of the diverse voices and narratives.

A resurgence of such interventions was observed, taking on a more assertive stance as control over urban narratives tightened, accompanied by an increase in the denial of political victims and opposition to micro-commemoration. Cardboard, an even more temporary material than plywood, emerged as symbols of grassroots resistance. On December 11th, 2023, the Telegram

channel of Memorial posted photos of cardboard plaques (Obšestvo Memorial, electronic source). Anonymous activists in St. Petersburg installed several cardboard copies of the Last Address plaques, which had been removed from the wall following complaints submitted on the portal ‘Our St. Petersburg’. This portal allows citizens to voice complaints anonymously online and has recently seen an influx of such complaints demanding the removal of plaques, many of which are subsequently removed by communal workers. Similar incidents had occurred in September, and in response, activists created temporary cardboard versions that occupied the spaces until local residents reinstated the original plaques. These temporary cardboard replicas embody grassroots resistance and serve as poignant reminders of urban narratives denied by those controlling the narratives.

These interventions, seemingly insignificant in the face of historical events, reflect the power of grassroots initiatives and the potential for alternative approaches to memorialization, with Last Address continuing its performance to this day. While the present circumstances may limit the impact of such micro-interventions, they serve as a reminder that the urban landscape has the potential to bear witness to diverse histories and acts of resistance. Engagement with and documentation of such projects allow for the exploration of the intricate relationship between urban conflict, memory, and artistic expression in ever-changing social and political landscapes.

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