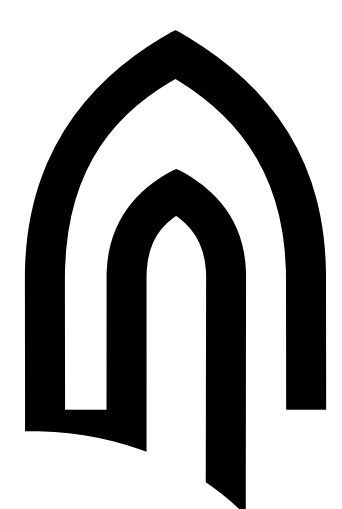


HOW TO REFRAME MONUMENTS:

THE TEHUMARDI MEMORIAL

EKA



TALLINNA ÜLIKOOL

Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has put a new perspective on the Soviet heritage in Estonia and elsewhere. In recent years, Estonians have witnessed heated disputes over the fate of Soviet monuments and seen many of them dismantled. All of this points to the need to examine both the history of the monuments as well as their meaning today.

This exhibition invites us to reflect on the history of the Battle of Tehumardi (8 October 1944), as well as how this event has been commemorated. Why did this particular battle become a key event in the history of the Red Army's Estonian Rifle Corps? What is the story behind this memorial created jointly by sculptors Riho Kuld and Matti Varik and architect Allan Murdmaa in 1966, as well as of the cemetery that was opened next to the column in 1975? How has the meaning of the battle and the monument changed over the decades? What could be the most appropriate solution for reinterpreting and redesigning the memorial, which has now been partly removed?

This exhibition is part of the 'How to Reframe Monuments' project, funded by the Estonian Ministry of Culture, which seeks new ways to recontextualise monuments and dissonant heritage. For the Tehumardi Memorial, we have asked five contemporary artists to propose their solutions.

Monumendi uued raamid

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The Battle of Tehumardi

The battle of Tehumardi, which took place late on the evening of 8 October 1944, between the units of the Red Army Estonian Rifle Corps and a retreating German battalion, was a random and strategically irrelevant clash — bloody but yielding no significant military outcomes. The battle occurred during the final phase of the war in Estonia, as the Red Army had already conquered the mainland and had just crossed the Väike väin Strait to Saaremaa.

Soviet forces, including two divisions of the Estonian Rifle Corps composed mostly of Estonian soldiers, were pursuing German units retreating towards the Sõrve Peninsula. The battle erupted unexpectedly when a German battalion, having fallen behind its comrades, encountered units of the Estonian Red Army Rifle Corps. In the darkness and drizzle, the Red Army soldiers initially mistook the German units for their own; they allowed the Germans to pass through their lines and even cleared the way. The situation then exploded, and the initial surprise shots escalated into fierce combat at close quarters and hand-to-hand skirmishes. Tanks and artillery, rifles and grenades, shovels and fists were all employed. The intense battle lasted through the night, leaving several hundred dead Estonians, Germans, and Russians on the battlefield, with approximately equal casualties of around 200 on each side. Despite the Red Army's superiority, the outcome of the battle remained unclear. Although the Estonian Rifle Corps took the battlefield, the remnants of the German battalion managed to retreat to Sõrve to rejoin their forces.



Tehumardi battlefield on the morning of October 9, 1944.
Unknown photographer. Estonian History Museum,
AM N 19993



View of Tehumardi cemetery (1948) and memorial (1966).
Unknown photographer, 1970. Võrumaa Muuseum,
VK F 530:1 F/n

In Soviet command posts, the battle was considered a failure — an unplanned clash that did not hasten the conquest of Saaremaa but rather slowed it down. However, Soviet authorities soon began to recognise the symbolic potential of the battle. At Tehumardi, a predominantly Estonian Soviet unit fought against a purely German unit (with no known Estonians among the latter), and unlike the battles of the Emajõgi River in the late summer of 1944 (where Estonians fought on both sides of the front line), there was no element of fratricide here. Consequently, Tehumardi offered an excellent opportunity to link the Red Army victory with the myth of the “700-year night of slavery” under German barons and to present the establishment of Soviet power with the support of the Red Army as “an Estonian cause.”

In November 1944, the newspaper *Saarte Hääl* described the battle as a “heroic act”, claiming it had sprung from “hatred against the centuries-old blood enemy — the German invader,” asserting that “just as centuries ago Lembitu and Tasuja chopped off the heads of Germans, so did the Estonian soldiers of the Red Army now kill the successors of the robber knights.” The creators of the Soviet historical interpretation quickly harnessed this “ancient hatred” to serve the new socialist order, transforming the Battle of Tehumardi into a kind of Soviet Estonian Battle of Võnnu (an episode in the Estonian War of Independence, 1918–20, where the Estonian army defeated a German unit composed mainly of Baltic Germans). According to the legendary radio and television journalist Valdo Pant, “a 700-year-old debt had been settled.”



Participants in the battles of 1944 in Tehumardi.

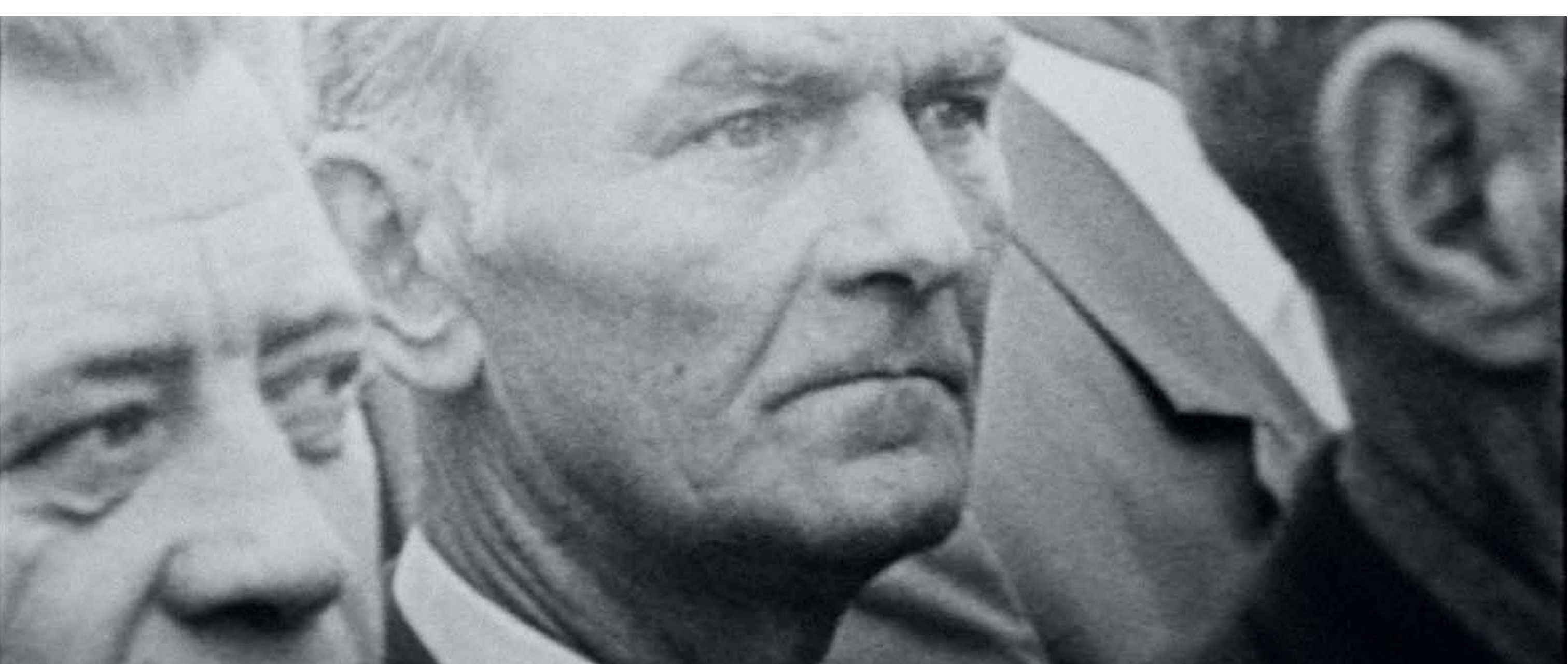
Photo: Arnold Allik, 1965. Saaremaa Museum, F 3029:3 F

Tehumardi as a Soviet Estonian memory site

The myth of Tehumardi was immortalised in concrete in 1967 — on the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution — when the current monument was erected near the battle site, replacing the previous modest memorial. Later, a field of memorial stones known as the Brotherhood Cemetery was added. The monument depicting a sword rising from the ground was inaugurated on the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Estonian Red Army Rifle Corps.

Unlike many other monuments dedicated to the Red Army, this one became a special memorial for the Estonian Red Army soldiers in special units within the Soviet armed forces and somewhat accidental heroes. Most of these soldiers had been conscripted into the Soviet army by force. They endured years of hardship in labour battalions in Arkhangelsk and the Urals and in the mass battles of the Red Army, only to unexpectedly return to Estonia as its “heroic liberators.” After the war, they became a privileged group in the new Soviet era, described by writer Ralf Parve as “the true generation of victors.”

Consequently, Tehumardi became a beloved memorial site for the veterans of the Soviet Estonian Rifle Corps, where the regiments’ councils of veterans organised visits, ceremonies, and other events. The memory of the battle had already been etched into literary culture through the popular novel “The Two Selves of Enn Kalm” (1961) by former Rifle Corps political officer Paul Kuusberg. The site gained further fame with the 1968 war film “Men in Soldier’s Coats,” based on Kuusberg’s novel and directed by Jüri Müür, who had fought with the Nazis. This was followed by several commemorative collections and thematic discussion groups. In 1974, the annual Tehumardi Rally (today known as the Saaremaa Rally) was initiated to honour the “liberation battles” of Saaremaa. The battle remained a part of local memory culture into the 2000s, during which one could even purchase the bitter “Tehumardi Battle Beer.”



Shots from the feature film "Men in Soldier's Coats". Directed by Jüri Müür. Tallinnfilm, 1968. National Archives of Estonia



Advertising poster for the Tehumardi Rally. 1986. Saaremaa Museum, 10365:5 Ard

The value of Tehumardi as a memorial site today

During the Soviet era, the Battle of Tehumardi and its monument were accompanied by official, ideologically "correct" narratives constructed by army political officers who were also party members. Estonian Red Army soldiers were depicted as staunch Bolsheviks. However, it would be reductive to approach the monument and the experience of the Estonian Rifle Corps solely from an ideological point of view.

The Tehumardi memorial is not just ideologised concrete and dolomite. It is also a site near where an actual deadly battle took place, with which veterans and their families associated their personal experiences and inner struggles for decades. The battle generated legends and even a kind of folklore that locals still recount today. For many fighters, Tehumardi became a genuinely important memorial site, a place to remember their fallen friends, brothers, and comrades — a place where they tried to find meaning in their lives and fates.

It is precisely this peculiar combination of ideology, national-communist memory creation, and organic life experience that makes the Tehumardi monument complex significant from the perspective of Estonian history. Nowhere else in Estonia or the world is there a place that can tell the complex story of the Estonian Red Army Rifle Corps — and do so not in a museum but in the landscape.

At a time when we are once again concerned about a threat from the East, an informed reminder of Soviet power — rather than its censorship — is more important than ever. Tehumardi is a valuable testament of how a totalitarian state worked to establish itself, how Estonian soldiers (and artists) were integrated into the service of a foreign power, and how tens of thousands of Estonian men, nearly half of the generation of that time, made sense of their complex destinies under the conditions of World War II and Soviet rule. They did so in various ways, sometimes supporting the ideology, sometimes condemning it, until they were ultimately forgotten by the public as being on the losing side of history.

Now is the time to rescue the history of Tehumardi from the supervision of Soviet political officers, the imperial revanchism of the Russian Federation, and the oblivion that has befallen it in the post-Soviet period. The Tehumardi monument complex (which could include the memorial stone dedicated to German soldiers) is already, in itself,

a memorial to the 20th century as an age of ideologies and the cult of war and sacrifice. With contemporary historical explanations and narratives, or a potential transformative artistic solution, we can make the dolomite tell an even more instructive story: both of the tragic fate of the Rifle Corps members and the broader Estonian experience in coping with the ideologies of the 20th century.



Laying of the cornerstone for the Tehumardi Memorial. Photo: Tõnu Grepp, 1966. Saaremaa Museum, F 3163:92 Fn



Monument to the Battle of Tehumardi. Postcard, 1979. Saaremaa Museum, F 3636:31 F



Tehumardi Memorial in 2009. Wikimedia Commons

Reframing monuments: ARTISTIC ADAPTATIONS

The architectural part of the Tehumardi monument, the field of plaques, is currently being relocated by the municipality of Saaremaa. It is important to find a sensitive and precise way in which an impressive work of landscape architecture can be reinstalled in a new framework and in a new role.

A monument creates history: it embodies what we want to remember or what the regime wants us to remember. It is an art form in the public space through which the political gaze manifests itself — the more powerful and manipulative, the more disturbing. Situations arise in which there is an acute sense of the need to remove the signs of colonial violence, alien ideology and misinformation. The act of elimination can have a liberating and cleansing effect, a practice that has been used by a number of prominent liberation movements, such as Black Lives Matter.

Estonia's Soviet-era memorials, which until recently resulted in a shrug of the shoulders, have taken on new meaning since the full-scale war waged by Russia in Ukraine. What seemed irrevocably consigned to history has turned out to be depressingly present.

Destroying objects is easy. It is much more difficult to confront memory and memories. Through the eye of the artist, a controversial monument can be reframed into an eloquent and profound work that both expands perceptions and critically dissects them.

An art programme involving artists and curators will help transform problematic monuments. The aim is to trigger open dialogue, stimulate creative solutions and create opportunities for new conceptual developments.

The sculptural and landscape design of the Tehumardi monument and its masterly execution testify to the originality, professionalism and aesthetics of the time. The artistic quality of the work may even at times overshadow the ideology of the commissioning Soviet regime.

The Battle of Tehumardi was undoubtedly a tragic event, and as a monument to historical trauma, it is still worth preserving. However, without renewed scrutiny, the memorial has a disturbing effect because its original accompanying texts contain misinformation. The project "How to Reframe Monuments" aims to provide support and a more sensitive analysis of the monument for visitors, the local municipality and the author.

Feedback from visitors is important for the artists and the research team. What is the best way to change the meaning of the monument? Which artistic solution seems the most convincing? We look forward to receiving your thoughts in the exhibition suggestion box.

Kirke Kangro

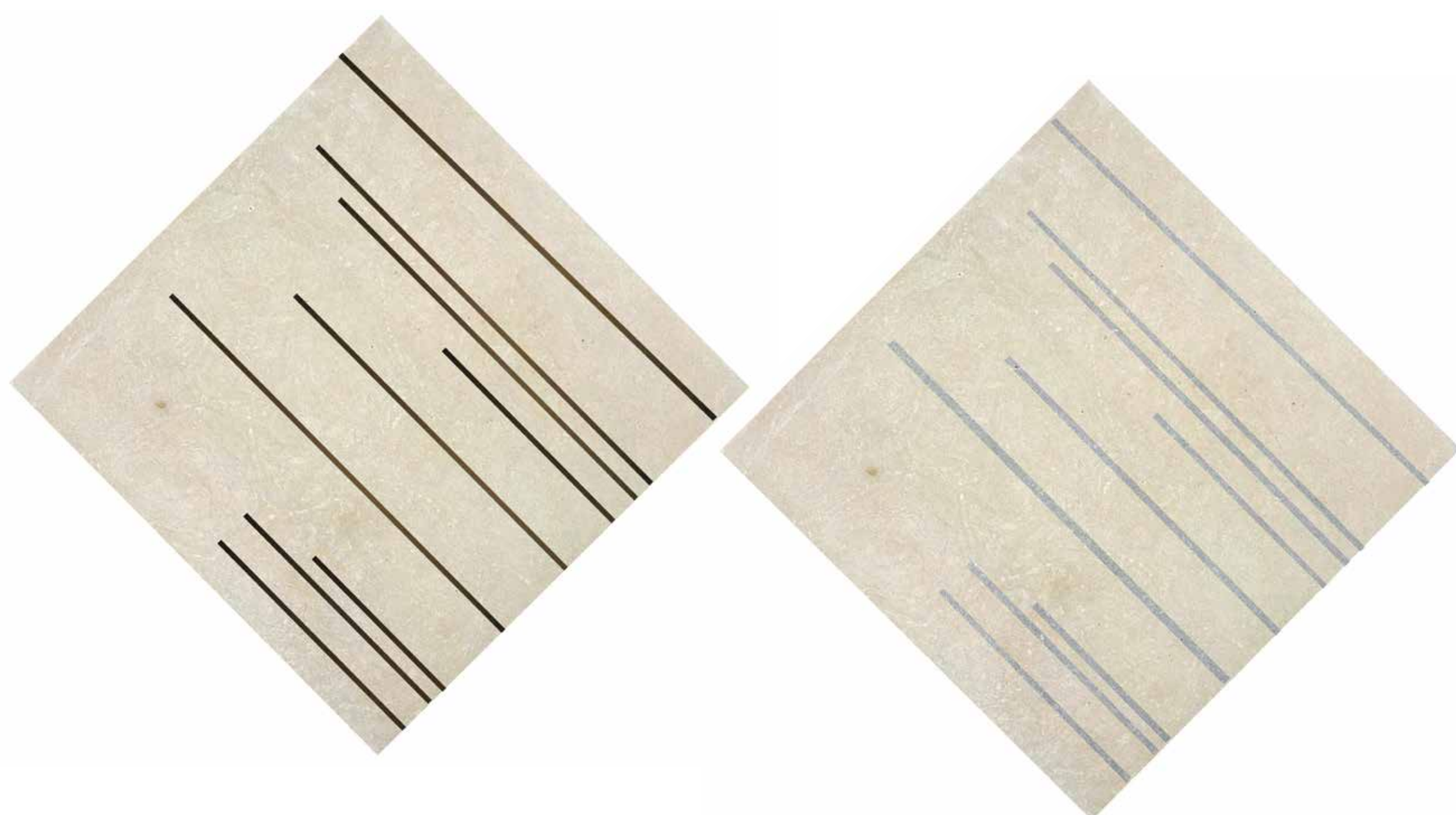
artistic curator of the project

Straws

Anna Mari Liivrand

This proposal, entitled Straws, suggests preserving the memorial as a whole by covering the grave markers with dolomite slabs. In turn, bronze or brass lines will be attached to the slabs, inspired by the windswept landscape





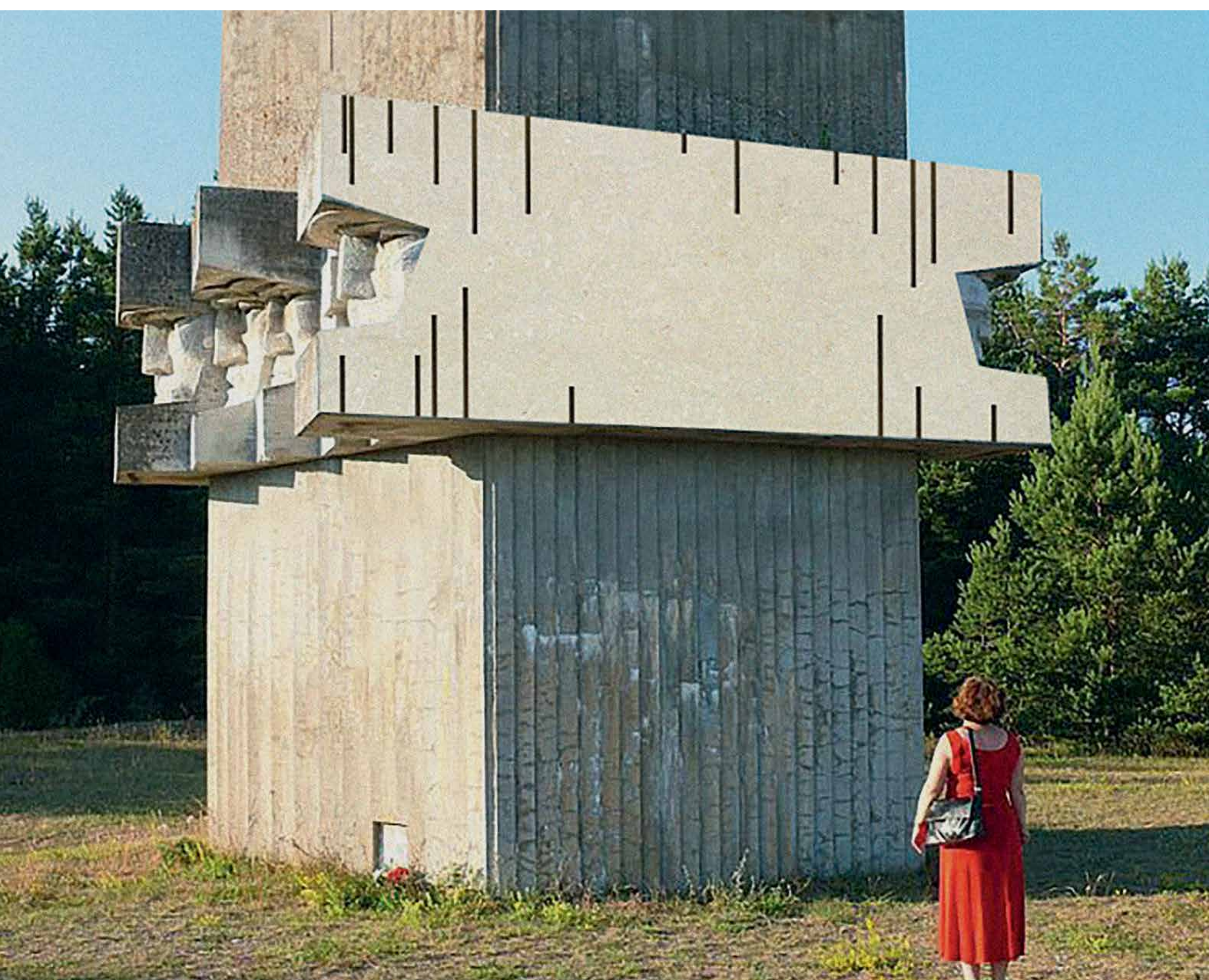
View of stones covering grave markers

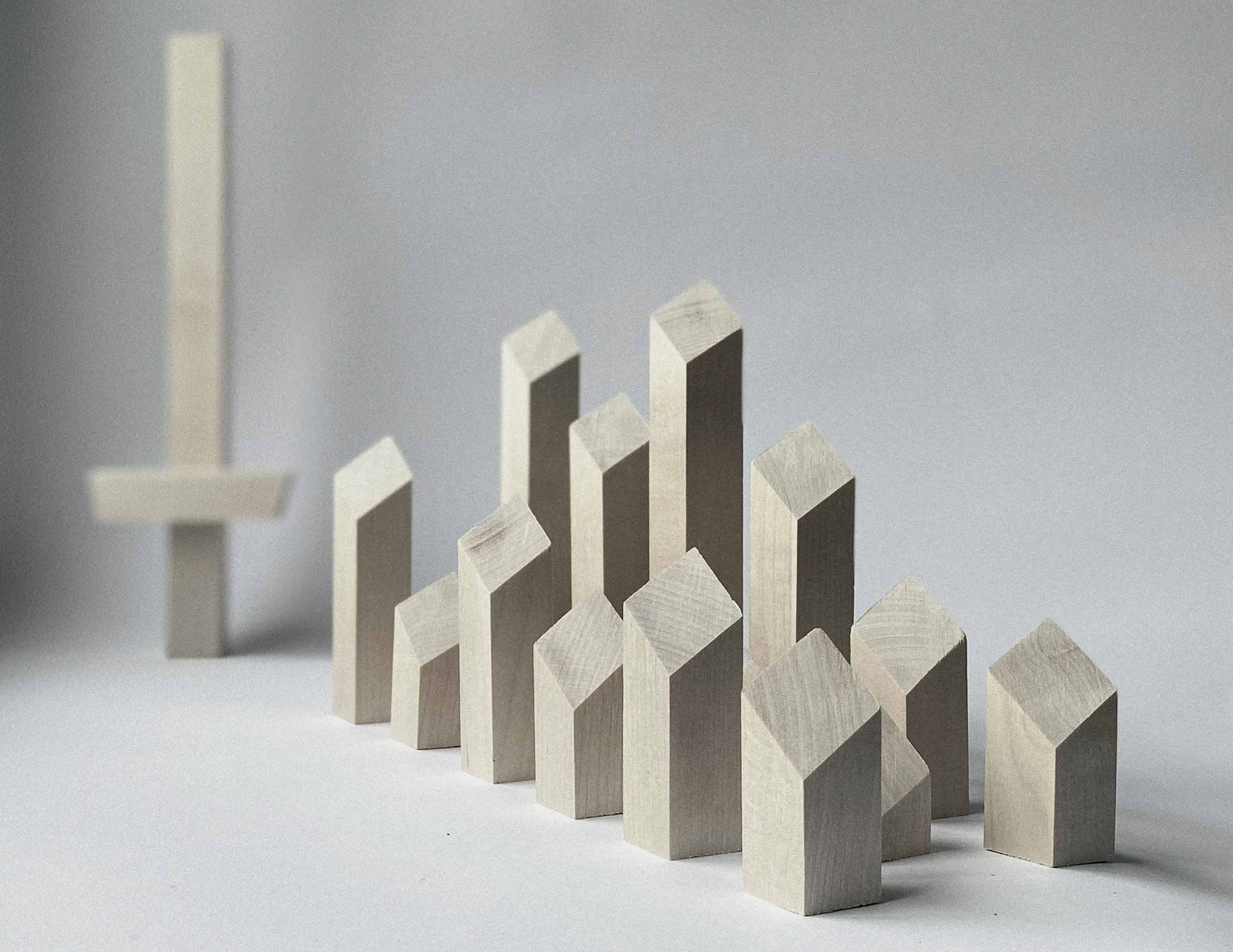
surrounding the memorial, in particular the red rushes that grow there. In this way, the grave markers take on a softer visual language, becoming more part of the landscape. Symbolically, the straw motif can also be seen as a reference to the fragile human soul at the mercy of the winds (alien powers), left with no choice but to act according to its own convictions.

The version on the left shows a plaque with bronze or brass strips. The use of metal on the stone has a warmer effect than stone alone. Over time, the metal oxidises, starting to soak into the stone, adding a teardrop motif.

The option on the right is a simplification: a similar image and effect is achieved by cutting grooves in the stone. The version on the right more closely follows the solidity of the monument and is less likely to change over time. Although the design of the stone depicts the straw in the same rhythm, in reality, each stone can easily be created as an individual piece. In this way, an asymmetrical composition more characteristic of nature is formed, which would also highlight the departed as individuals.

The current text of the memorial monument “1941 To the Soviet soldiers — defenders and liberators of Saaremaa. 1945” will be covered with the same dolomite as the grave markers and the straw motif will be repeated. This motif fits in nicely with the texture of the pillar itself. An obituary should be chosen for the centre of the plaque to commemorate the departed with dignity.





No vacancies / Anonymous identities

Taavi Piibemann

How can a monument take on a broader and more contemporary meaning, instead of a narrow Soviet one, and do so without the feeling that we are censoring or erasing something?

The form of the grave marker, a cut slab, is replicated and new slabs are added between the existing ones so that there is no (walking) space between the stones. We are forced to look at the common grave from a distance. The new, “white sheet” wreaths differ from the existing ones in that they are without inscriptions and are all at different heights – lower and higher than the existing ones. As such, the whole remains less homogeneous and war-like. The new stones are for those who died then and were not inscribed, and for those who will die in the future and will not be inscribed. The pentagons remain, but they are harder to see from a distance and are also partially obscured by the new stones.

An almost eternal fire / How to feed memory

Taavi Piibemann

Solar panels of exactly the same shape are placed on the grave markers. Between the grave markers on the ground level are a series of luminaires with a fine beam of light aimed directly at the sky. Solar energy is collected in batteries. In the evenings and at dusk, this provides a single beam of light directly into the sky. In this way, the memorial is “off” part of the time and “on” part of the time, like memories in our consciousness and memorials in political discourse.

Time carpet

Johannes Säre

In order to neutralise elements referring to Soviet power, the text of the memorial should be removed, either completely or by retaining the dates 1941 and 1945. A smaller viewing platform could also be installed on the seaward side of the memorial.

The platform would confront the viewer with the portraits of the soldiers depicted on the monument, displacing the classical power relationship of the monument with the viewer, and offering a new abstract structure to the portraits, derived from the proximity of the viewer. The platform could be designed in such a way that it would not be visible when approaching the monument from the highway and would allow the original view to be maintained without the added visual noise.

The grave markers in the cemetery also form a powerful and exciting ensemble in their own right, with a very impressive overall geometric effect. My proposal to cover the Soviet-era symbolism on them would be experimental but plausible and feasible. The headstones could be covered with moss, which would gradually cover them with a soft green carpet.

This would preserve the overall geometric shape of the stones, slightly softening their sharp corners. The merging would have a strong symbolic meaning, referring to something whose power and meaning have long been buried under new layers.

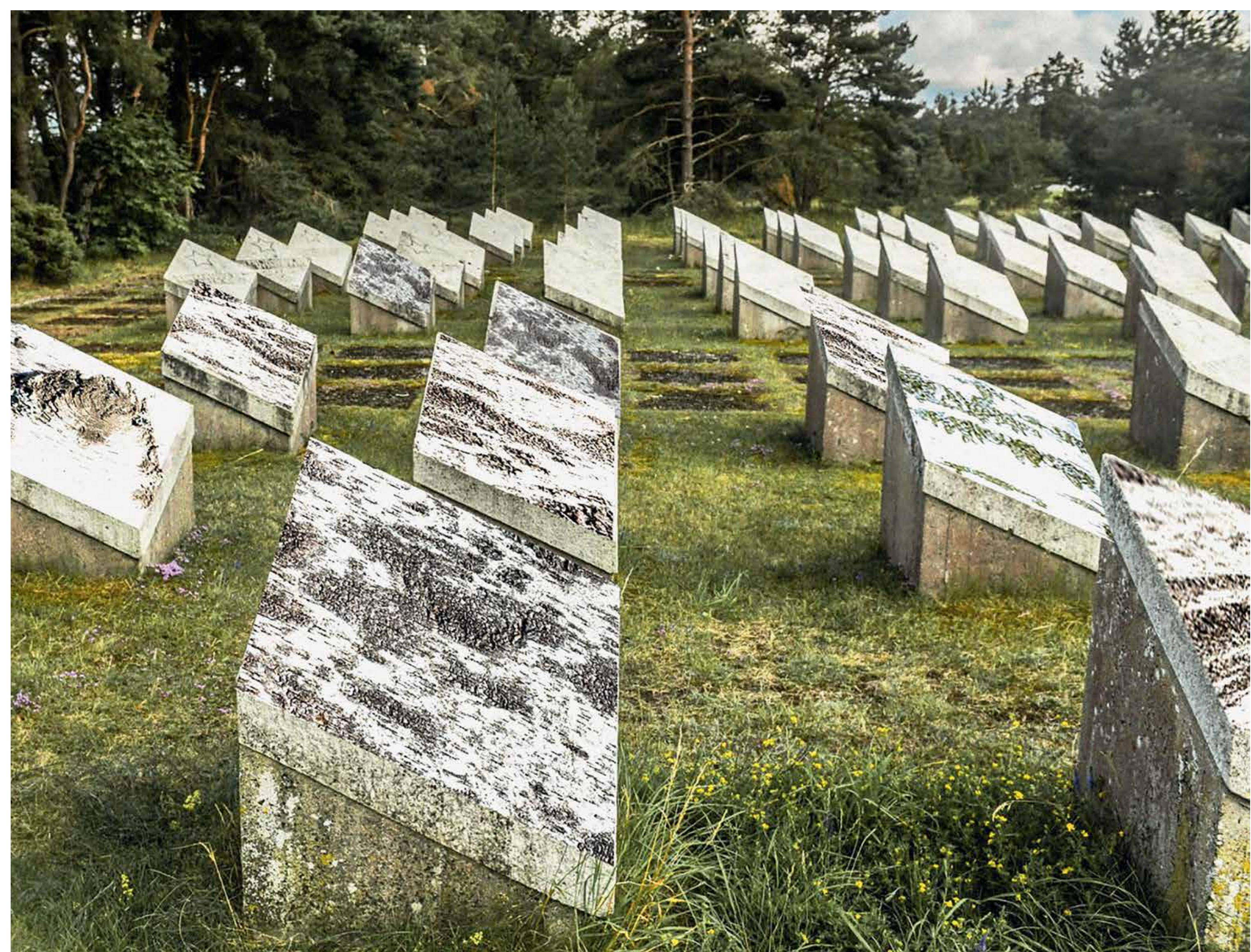




Tehumardi – Alternative information space

Kirke Kangro

The thirty stones of the Tehumardi memorial will be covered with limestone plaques similar to the existing ones. Instead of Soviet symbolism, the plaques will carry new visual information — a graphic novel chronicling the events in Tehumardi. A series of images will tell the tragic story of the Battle of Tehumardi, followed by the Soviet period and the history of the making of the memorial, how the authors worked with the monument (e.g., sculptor Riho Kuld told how he used to swim 250 metres in the sea every morning before sculpting the stones), while the final panels will deal with the current issues surrounding the memorial — the debate over whether to dismantle or adapt it. Some of the stones await the future of the memorial. In this way, the plaques, whose information and validity have been incorrect from the moment of their installation, and whose validity as gravestones is also questionable, will reflect the situation and its problematics directly.



Birch bark letters

Kirke Kangro

The texts on the plaques and the monument are replaced by images of birch bark. This creates an information field with messages from tree trunks. The birch bark “texts” would be scanned and printed on metal plates.

Tehumardi symbiosis

Kristina Norman

Saaremaa is associated with its alvar vegetation and especially with the abundance of protected species of orchids. Biologists say that orchids are indicators of the health of the environment because they are fragile and sensitive to changes. Orchids form complex symbiotic relationships with other organisms, needing fungi and pollinators to reproduce. They are like monuments to the pollinators of millions of years ago, which they mimic in their flowering forms.

The Tehumardi Memorial could be complemented with a layer of nature conservation and environmental awareness. In this way, the memorial could function as a symbiotic environment, where the Memorial to the Battle of Tehumardi retains its overall aesthetic appearance, but the names and images of the most notable species of Saaremaa's flora and fauna are added to the plaques. It would be important to cooperate with both ecologists and schools in Saaremaa in the selection of suitable species, so that the information boards would be designed by local schoolchildren. In addition, an ensemble of fragile, airy, larger-than-life human figures could be placed in the open spaces of the memorial, depicting an outing by hobby naturalists.

