On a hot summer afternoon in 2005, during one of my yearly trips back to my hometown of Dubrovnik, Croatia, my sister and I were passed by a procession of cars, honking their horns and waving Croatian flags. I remarked on what I assumed were soccer fans celebrating their team’s victory. My sister laughed, noting my gap in understanding after many years living as an expatriate in the United States: “That’s not a group of soccer fans. It’s a wedding. Ever since Croatia gained independence, wedding car processions often wave the new Croatian flag as they drive through the city.” This was surprising news. When I lived in Dubrovnik, Croatia was still a part of the former Yugoslavia, and I don’t remember ever seeing Yugoslav flags waved during weddings. Whereas my sister had lived in Dubrovnik during the breakup of Yugoslavia and through the war, this was my first experience of what I would come to understand as the new Croatian national consciousness. I subsequently saw images of several art projects that took place during the war and was inspired to investigate for my master’s thesis the visible ways in which Croatian national identity first began to be expressed in artistic production.
Following the 1991 Yugoslav army attack on Dubrovnik, local artists were motivated to show their defiance by using the Old City—its ruins, its boarded-up monuments and shop windows—to create site-specific public artworks. Local photographers documented the destruction, raising international awareness of the plight of the Croatian people and the attempt to eradicate their culture. Together, the artists of Dubrovnik coped with the circumstances of war through public works, anthropomorphizing the city—treating it as a living being—and galvanizing its population through art to create a new Croatian national consciousness.

But first, a short historical overview: In 1990 the first multiparty elections took place in Yugoslavia after 45 years of Communism. The Croatian Democratic Union Party won in Croatia, while in both Serbia and Montenegro the Communist Party remained in power. Even though the constitution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia gave each republic the right to secede, the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević insisted (illegally) that some form of Serbian-dominated federation continue to rule all of Yugoslavia. In May 1991 a referendum was held in Croatia, the results of which indicated that 94 percent of voters favored separating from the Yugoslav federation. Croatia declared independence the following month. Rebel Serbs living in Croatia, backed by the Yugoslav federation and Milošević, started skirmishes that escalated into war, which lasted until 1995.

Dubrovnik held particular significance in this conflict because of its symbolic and cultural importance. From the 14th to the 19th century the city, formerly known as the Republic of Ragusa, was a rich mercantile center whose main rivals were the Republics of Venice and Genoa. While other parts of Croatia were under Venetian, Hungarian, Austrian, or Ottoman rule, Dubrovnik was an independent city-state and a cradle of Croatian medieval culture that generated many significant artists, writers, poets, scientists, and seamen. Ragusa’s prosperity provided ample financial resources to build an architecturally unified town, well integrated into the limestone landscape. Dubrovnik’s well-preserved medieval walled city, with its ramparts, towers, palaces, churches, squares, and other monuments, is a striking example of Renaissance and Baroque urban planning. For these reasons, the city as a whole was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979. The Old City thus represents not only medieval-era architectural and cultural achievements, but also the community’s continuity over the course of centuries.
A place can have a great impact on individual and collective identity. Miwon Kwon addresses this phenomenon in her article “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity”:

*Despite the proliferation of discursive sites and ‘fictional’ selves, the phantom of a site as an actual place remains, and our psychic, habitual attachments to places regularly return as they continue to inform our sense of identity. And this persistent, perhaps secret, adherence to the actuality of places (in memory, in longing) is not necessarily a lack of theoretical sophistication but a means for survival.*

Artists in Dubrovnik used this attachment to place as a wartime coping strategy; site-specific practices enabled them to participate in the war effort in their own way. How the Old City of Dubrovnik informed and made visible each artist’s sense of identity is one of my key areas of focus.

**Ivo Grbić’s Site-Specific Wartime Art**

Ivo Grbić is a well-established Dubrovnik artist who has practiced stylized figurative painting, drawing, and graphic arts since the 1950s. His home, art studio, and gallery were all located in the same building, a Baroque palace built after the 1667 earthquake on Od Puča 16 street in the Old City. Grbić says:

*My house was one of the first that was targeted by the Yugoslav army, early in the morning of December 6, 1991. I was a member of Matica Hrvatska [Croatian Matrix], one of the oldest Croatian cultural organizations, which was banned during the Communist regime.*

Three incendiary missiles hit his home, gutting it.

Grbić, an artist of an older generation, came of age when the form of Communism practiced in Yugoslavia was harsher. As a result, his experience of Communism was far more negative than that of the younger generation of artists. His long-term membership in the Croatian Matrix, which originated in 1842, is an early sign of his conception of himself as a steward of Croatian consciousness.

He says: “During the war I started creating installation art, a type of art I didn’t practice prior to the war.” He began working with what was left of his home, just a few bare walls, converting the burned-out site into a continually evolving site-specific exhibition space. He showed his own paintings and graphic art as well as murals that he created prior to war, which were damaged in the attacks. He also created installations made of ruins (for instance damaged limestone building blocks
dispersed on the site) and elements from Croatian literature, Catholicism, and traditional local dress and musical instruments. Even though he was forced to live as a displaced person outside the Old City walls for 11 years after his house was bombed, he kept returning to the site of his burned home and continued to use the location in creative ways, incorporating and reusing local elements, simultaneously reinforcing the location’s historicity and his reverence for Croatian cultural traditions. He opened most of his exhibitions on traditional Roman Catholic holidays of local importance, such as Easter, Christmas, and Epiphany.

In April 1993, the 59th P.E.N. conference—an international association of poets, essayists, and novelists—took place in Dubrovnik, and Grbić opened an exhibition. Inside the shell of his building, with the open sky above, he displayed what was left of his art after the bombardment as well as paintings and graphic works voluntarily and informally given to him for the exhibition by friends, neighbors, and others who owned his art. This was the largest and longest-running of Grbić’s exhibitions to date. He accomplished it by relying on community bonds; the lenders felt in their own way able to contribute to the communal public celebration by loaning the works, even knowing that the art would be exposed to the elements. Among the exhibited pieces were oil paintings and graphics featuring some of Grbić’s favorite motifs: old Dubrovnik interiors, regional folklore, religious motifs, seascapes, and numerous scenes from the music, theater, and opera performances staged during
the Dubrovnik Summer Festival. Inside a glass case he exhibited missile parts he’d found scattered around the ruins of his home as well as replicas (created by him) of old ceramic apothecary vessels from one of the oldest pharmacies in Europe, established by the Franciscan monks in Dubrovnik in 1317. The exhibition was a story told in three dimensions; it memorialized the effects of the attacks on Grbić’s home and on the Old City as a whole.

It remained on display for eight months, from April until December of 1993. Grbić deployed transparent tarps and plastic bags as a makeshift ceiling, but the space was still mostly open to the elements, and in the end eight paintings were ruined by weather. This destruction paralleled, symbolically, the vast destruction of Croatian architecture and culture by the war. Grbić took a risk by almost deliberately destroying his artworks in an effort to present his art in this new context.

**The Public Art Mural Project of December 1991:**
**A Collaborative Approach to Art during the War in Croatia**

More publicly visible than Grbić’s project were the murals created over Christmas 1991 in the Old City’s boarded-up shop windows and public monuments. This impromptu mural project vividly demonstrated the emergence of new collaborative artistic approaches that were specifically triggered by wartime circumstances.

After the first attacks in October 1991, the facades of the most historically important buildings in the Old City were quickly boarded up to prevent further damage. This in turn prompted a spontaneous reaction by a group of local artists, who invited other professional and amateur artists to participate in painting murals that would enliven the suddenly dismal city streets. The paint was donated by a local paint factory, and the cans of it were shared—placed on a cart, which was drawn along the Stradun (the main Old City street) and Luža (the main square at the eastern end of the Stradun). Despite the fact that the attacks were ongoing, the artists chose to paint in the open, knowing that their actions were emotionally important to the city’s population. According to Davor Lucijanović, one of the participants: “The aim of the project was to show an opposition to war by breaking the psychosis of fear.” And indeed, groups of children would frequently surround the working artists, totally engrossed, and forget for a time the destruction and chaos surrounding them.

One of the most interesting murals was on the Orlando Column, at the center of the main square, Luža, where public spectacles have taken place for centuries. Traditionally, citizens would be summoned here to be informed of new state decrees and to witness public punishments. The square is located between the Baroque Church of Saint Blaise, the patron saint of Dubrovnik, and the Sponza Palace, the former customs house and mint of the Dubrovnik Republic. In 1920 the
Sponza became the home of the Dubrovnik Archives, one of the richest archival collections in the Mediterranean region. On the north side of the column is the statue of the medieval knight Orlando, erected in 1418. Orlando, in the Dubrovnik dialect, is Roland, the legendary eighth-century Frankish knight who was killed in battle and came to embody (in the “Song of Roland”) the qualities of nobility and freedom. By placing a statue of Orlando in this prominent city square, the officials of the Republic of Dubrovnik may also have been subtly reminding Dubrovnik’s Ottoman suzerains that the city would continue to identify with Christian Europe rather than Istanbul (formerly Constantinople). Over time, the statue became a symbol of freedom and free trade.

On top of the mast of the Orlando statue, the white flag of Saint Blaise, patron saint of the Republic of Dubrovnik, waved for five centuries. After the abolishment of the Dubrovnik Republic by Napoleon in 1808, the flag of Saint Blaise was replaced by the Italian, then the Austrian, then the Austro-Hungarian, and finally the Yugoslav flag. In 1990, on the eve of Croatia’s independence, locals proudly replaced the Yugoslav flag with the flag of Libertas—the Latin word for freedom. In 1991, following the Croatian declaration of independence from the former Yugoslavia, the Libertas flag was replaced by the new Croatian flag. Red, white, and blue with the checkered red-and-white Croatian coat of arms in the middle, the new flag displayed five crests along the top, symbolizing Croatia’s five traditional provinces (Zagreb, Dubrovnik, Dalmatia, Istria, and Slavonia).
During the attacks on the city at the end of 1991, the statue of Orlando was boarded up for protection along with the shop windows on Stradun. Davor Lucijanović and Marija Koprivica, professional artists who participated in the collaborative public art project, painted the contours of Orlando on the boards covering the statue. Orlando was thus simultaneously concealed and revealed via these artistic renderings. Each artist painted two sides of the Orlando Column, resulting in four representations. The first showed a knight, symbolizing the soldier, defender of Croatia; the second a troubadour with a lute; the third a lover with a heart; and last, a peacekeeping member of the United Nations Protection Force, which brings humanitarian aid and food to populations impoverished by war.

The painted Orlando Column and the new Croatian flag floating above symbolized two identities—one local and one national—now operating simultaneously. The local Dubrovnik identity celebrated the historic achievements of the Dubrovnik Republic, and the painting of Orlando took on a broader, national identity, as Orlando became the defender of Croatia. From this point on, Dubrovnik and its citizens identified with the struggles for independence of the newly formed democratic Republic of Croatia.

In yet another layer of symbolism, behind Orlando’s head one of the artists painted the flag of the European Union, blue with a circle of yellow stars in the middle, signifying the yearnings of the new democratic Croatia to become a part of the European Union, a part of the West. The circle of stars around Orlando’s head made him look like an angel with a halo, overseeing the city and serving as its protector.

In Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art, Miwon Kwon discusses the convergence of art and architecture in site-specific practices:

While site-specific art continues to be described as a refutation of originality and authenticity as intrinsic qualities of the art object or the artist, this resistance facilitates the translation and relocation of these qualities from the artwork to the place of its presentation, only to have them return to the artwork now that is has become integral to the site.\(^5\)

In Grbić’s installation and the Christmastime 1991 public mural project, artists made use of specific, historically important locations, interacting directly with the city’s Renaissance and Baroque architecture. The works actually became integral to their particular sites, and carried more emotional weight than if they had been displayed elsewhere. Grbić’s works displayed in his burned house had to be looked at not only as individual works of art, but also as part of the house. The same is true for the architecture surrounding each mural. Situating their art at these particular sites helped the artists express their concern for the city and their attachment to it.
Moreover, the Christmas 1991 public mural project was psychologically important to the local population. As the artists showed defiance to the Serbs, they helped dispel fear among the local citizens.

**The Photography of Pavo Urban: Representation of Dubrovnik in a Time of War**

Pavo Urban’s photographs taken between October and December 1991 portray Dubrovnik’s besieged architecture and its citizens in distress. Urban’s photography functioned both as a memorial of wartime atrocities and as a trigger for the formation of a new national identity. Urban was accepted in fall 1991 to the Academy of Film Arts in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, and had moved there and was about to begin his studies, then suddenly returned to Dubrovnik and served as a soldier in the Župa Dubrovačka front line, the region located to the east of the city. At the same time that he was using his gun in the city’s defense, he also started using his camera in the battlefield. After the Župa Dubrovačka region fell Urban began using his camera exclusively, recording the destruction of Dubrovnik’s historic core. Urban’s photography illustrates how the work of a young up-and-coming photographer crystallized into maturity during wartime.

Immediately prior to the war, Urban photographed nudes in the interiors of Dubrovnik’s Renaissance and Baroque palaces, often framed by doorways and holding religious elements such as chalices and crosses; he was also known for his pictures of boat ropes against the sea. During the war, however, he exclusively focused on the city’s destruction in his series entitled *Rat Art* (“War-Art”). Urban’s photographs of the city under bombardment are powerful memorials wherein absence plays a palpable role; he shows death and destruction without showing the actual acts. Urban succeeds in demonstrating a general feeling about war at a specific moment in time, regardless of whether he portrays people or other subjects.

In summer 2005 I had an opportunity to interview Mrs. Mirjana Urban, the artist’s mother. I was perusing her private library and archives when a thick binder of neatly folded film negatives, clearly labeled in Pavo Urban’s handwriting, caught my attention. As I browsed through the negatives, Mrs. Urban told me: “I told Pavo that it was too dangerous to photograph the city under attack, but to no avail. He didn’t listen. He went anyway. Sometimes he even lied about his whereabouts, so that I wouldn’t worry.” Urban was killed in December 1991 while photographing the attack on the Old City.

The director of the Gallery of Modern Art in Dubrovnik, Antun Maračić, sums up the significance of Urban’s work:
A fierce eros in Urban won out over caution. Rationality remained only in the capturing and organization of scenes. The photographs speak clearly of this attitude. If we compare them with shots by other photographers (also of course valuable historical testimonies), Urban’s stand out at the very first glance because of their close angles, precise focus, and passionate feeling for the event, the brilliant feedback of energy. From the pictures it is clear that the events concern the artist himself.  

Urban’s photographs of the first attacks are beautiful. His choice of subject displays moral sensitivity because images of the city and the expressions on people’s faces reflect the truth about war, destruction, and the scope of human suffering. Thus, his photographs not only depict the human victims, but also document the city itself as a victim of intentional destruction.

The contemporary photographer Martha Rosler discusses different levels of meaning in documentary photography in her 1981 essay “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography).” Her model affords us a look at Urban’s photography from more than a local perspective:

A documentary image has two moments: (1) the “immediate,” instrumental one, in which an image is caught or created out of the stream of the present and held up as testimony, as evidence in the most legalistic of senses . . . and (2) the conventional “aesthetic-historical” moment, less definable in its boundaries, in which the viewer’s argumentativeness cedes to the organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic “rightness” or well-formedness . . . of the image.

Urban’s work has literally served as testimony in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, in trials against the commanders and politicians responsible for the attacks on Dubrovnik. The “aesthetic-historical” moment of Urban’s photographs will continue to grow not only because of the scenes that he chose to shoot, but also because his photographs echo his own deep sentiments toward his hometown and country. His photography is more than just documentary; it demonstrates more than a specific moment in time in the history of Croatia.

Fear: A Man with a Dog was shot in November 1991 in the vault under the city’s belfry. It shows three men taking shelter during an air raid. The man in the background at right is sitting and covering his ears with his hands to protect himself from the piercing noise of the bombardment. The man in the background at left is standing, rigid, with a serious, downward gaze. The man in the foreground is finding
solace by tightly embracing a dog with his right hand and petting it with his left hand. The composition and the postures of the three men give this image the quality of a Renaissance painting, for the eye travels full-circle—down the curve of the man’s arm to the dog, from there to the man sitting at right, then to the man standing, and back to the man holding the dog.

The surrounding architecture—the steps, the wall to the left, and the door in the background—is all typical of the Old City. Urban originally titled this work *A Man with a Dog*. The word “fear” was added posthumously by his mother and a photographer friend to make it more iconic and evocative. Marko Giljača, a Dubrovnik journalist, points out that the men in this image represent strong emotions: fear, contempt, resignation, and gentle altruism.8 This is one of Urban’s most exhibited photographs. It represents a microcosm of human emotions, a moment of love exchanged between two different beings, one human and one animal.

The element that most draws my attention—the *punctum*, as Roland Barthes would say—is in the center, specifically the left hand of the man holding the dog, blurred from the petting motion and the only distorted element. It brings a moment of encouragement, a spark of hope and tenderness. The barely decipherable movement can also be understood symbolically as marking a blur of mind during times of war, a moment when the incomprehensible horror cannot be reconciled or represented rationally.

On December 6, 1991, during the worst attack on the Old City—when it was being bombarded simultaneously from land, sea, and air—Urban photographed the shelling of the Church of Saint Blaise, in front of which stands the aforementioned statue of Orlando. The resulting photograph, *Stone Dust*, shows this heart of the Old City. Behind the Orlando Column is a wall with public death notices from the war obscured by dust from the shelling. As Urban was taking the photograph, a burst of shrapnel struck him in his stomach. He bled to death at the age of 23, still shooting pictures as he fell. Thus, this image is more than a symbol. It is rich in narrative: It tells us about the struggle for freedom, the real damage
sustained by the city and its monuments, the cruel irony of “dust to dust,” and a young photographer who recorded the precise moment of his own tragic death. This image is different from any other, because what is happening behind the camera is just as significant as the scene being captured in front of it. Urban is looking through the lens for the last time, the image a metonym for death itself.

Urban’s photography reveals the brutality taking place in common spaces: city harbors, city streets, city squares, the vault under the city’s belfry. Urban was so driven by a love for his city and passion for his art that he was unconcerned for his own safety. Not only Urban’s photographs, but also the loss of his life, show us the true costs of war. As John Berger says, photographs of agony “remind us shockingly of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstractions of political theory, casualty statistics, or news bulletins.”

Urban’s photographs and the agony of his death have spoken to the horrors of war beyond the borders of Croatia. His pictures have been exhibited in galleries and museums in Italy, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Brazil, raising international awareness of events in Dubrovnik and Croatia. A solo exhibition of his work in 1992, in London’s Royal Festival Hall, was part of an exhibition entitled Dubrovnik in War; another solo show, Pavo Urban: Dubrovnik ‘91, took place at Düsseldorf’s Kunstmuseum in 1992. In 1993 Urban was posthumously awarded the Fritz Sänger Prize for courageous journalism, and his work was exhibited at the Bundeshaus in Bonn, Germany. That same year he was included in the group exhibition Croatian War Photographers in the International Photography Biennale in São Paulo.

In her book Regarding the Pain of Others Susan Sontag says, “To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture.” Urban’s images are engraved in the memories of many local people, not only because he gained notoriety for dying in the act of photographing the city under
attack, but also because his photographs later came to be so closely identified with the Croatian struggle for independence.

Photographs have the power to haunt us. Urban’s photographs have haunted me ever since I saw them for the first time. It was before the war, in a book I received as a gift from Croatia. The book contained two of his pictures. One was a seascape at sunset, and the other framed reflections of cypresses and reeds in the Dubrovnik River. As an expatriate, his photographs, more than any text, had (and still have) the power to make me instantly recall my home: the blue waters of the Adriatic Sea, the whitewashed limestone of the medieval architecture, the boats in the harbor. They awaken my nostalgia. Each of the locations he photographed represents a site where I spent my childhood years, triggering many memories. Now, when I look at his war photographs, I feel like I am recalling events I didn’t even experience; they make me feel as though I had been present in Croatia during the war. They make me understand better what my own family had to endure while Dubrovnik was under attack.

Urban, like many other war photographers, was a unique person willing to face danger for the sake of capturing the truth on film. James Nachtwey, the world-famous war photographer and the 2004 American Photo Photographer of the Year, wrote: “If war is an attempt to negate humanity, then photography can be perceived as the opposite of war, and if used well it can be a powerful ingredient in the antidote to war.” Urban’s photography certainly accomplishes this. His photographs, by displaying a stark, ironic beauty, indeed serve as a protest, a remembrance, and an antidote to war.

Since the war’s end, historical reenactments are held regularly, mostly for tourists, such as city guards wearing Renaissance costumes before the eastern and western city gates, and the changing of the guard that passes through Stradun. Dubrovnik’s contemporary art scene, ironically, got a huge shot in the arm in the midst of so much death and destruction. More importantly, the aggression against Dubrovnik triggered Wade Goddard, a war photographer from New Zealand, to open a unique gallery in the Old City in 2002. War Photo Ltd. is an exhibition space devoted solely to worldwide war and conflict photography that lets “people see war as it is.” The gallery serves to raise awareness of war atrocities in the hope of promoting world peace, and its impact deserves further study.

Despite having no military outposts, Dubrovnik suffered a barrage of fire from the Yugoslav army in 1991–92. The attacks as revealed on newscasts, and even more profoundly through the artworks discussed here and others, demonstrated to the international community what was happening in Croatia and prompted international recognition of the newly formed democratic Republic of Croatia.
Dubrovnik became a crucial symbol of resistance and independence for the Croatian nation, and with the help of UNESCO, it has risen from the ashes and is once again the “Pearl of the Adriatic.” In the midst of Croatia’s struggle for independence, the impromptu, ephemeral art that adorned the city’s boarded-up city monuments was just as significant in memorializing the emergence of the new Croatian national identity as the photographs that will forever document the destruction for future generations.

Notes
Unless otherwise attributed, all quotes are from interviews conducted by the author in Croatia in summer 2005 with Ivo Grbić, Davor Lucijanović, and Mrs. Mirjana Urban.
10. Antun Maračić, Pavo Urban—The Last Shots, 41.