

Queering the Urban Space: The Adventures of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled in Belgrade, Serbia¹

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Abstract

Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled (*Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani*) is an activist project by Nikola Herman (alias Nikša), who also involved his pug Yoda in creating a street art alter ego to bring critical commentary and humor to the streets of Belgrade, Serbia, between 2014 and 2018. Inspector's work is closely intertwined with the LGBTQ+ history and street art interventions in Belgrade over the past two decades. It provides an example of a locally contextualized and critical appropriation of the concept and term queer (in Serbian, *kvar*, which literally translates to "malfunction"). In nearly 200 graffiti and visual messages, Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled playfully appropriated vernacular language, often subverting their meaning, and offering an important gender and social critique in the nationalistic and sometimes violent public space of Belgrade in the mid-2010s. It is paramount to look at these interventions in a contextualized and embodied manner: as situational artworks which serve as tools of queer place-making. The stenciled little pug with speech balloons that Nikša used to tag the city may be seen as a sign of resistance and hope within an environment prone to desensitization to violence and general apathy.

Keywords

queer street art; Serbia; LGBTQ+; activism; stencils

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1. Introduction

Imagine you are walking down a familiar street lined with charming but somewhat run-down pre-WWII buildings and more recent gray socialist blocks. You pass by cafes and parks, until you realize a dog is following you and even trying to address you as a passer-by. Every so often, you see a pug painted on the walls, with dozens of messages such as *Izvini, nisi moj stereotip* (Sorry, you're not my stereotype), *Ne tuci (p)se!* (Don't beat the dogs/yourself!), and *Hejteroseksualci* (Heterosexuals), among others. The pug is famously known as Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled (IYW, *Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani*), an activist (art + activism) project by Nikša, which also included his pug Yoda in creating a mysterious street art character. To avoid confusion, I am using *he* when referring to Nikša as an individual/author, and *they* when talking

about IYW as a project which includes Yoda the dog. They primarily operated on the streets of Belgrade, Serbia, from 2014 to 2018, using stenciled pugs with speech balloons to convey almost 200 distinct messages that ranged from activist comments to everyday sayings.

There is a sense of urgency in readdressing these works by Nikša and IYW in light of recent events, including the EuroPride in 2022 and the resurgence of right-wing murals (Lhullier, 2022; Eror, 2021). Despite increased visibility and a more stable presence of the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia over the years, current social controversies and ongoing discrimination unfortunately reflect challenges similar to those faced in 2010s. In recent years, LGBTQ+ street art seems to have largely vanished from the streets of Belgrade.

Against this backdrop, I want to argue how Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled's street activism, as a form of situational art,¹ played a central role in queer acts of place-making and enacting counter-publics in Belgrade during the 2010s. The aim is to highlight the significance of these essential marginalized voices in public space for denouncing violence perpetrated by different right-wing groups, addressing the widespread indifference and insensitivity.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

How did Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled tackle issues of violence and desensitization of Serbian society? Which locations and messages did they choose to communicate in Belgrade? How were the streets of Belgrade "queered" by their interventions? To answer these questions, this paper takes into consideration the following:

- The use of street art as a public and situational form of art, which encompasses an invented character (pseudonym, alter ego), and the graffiti practice of tagging—visually claiming public spaces.
- A variety of intelligent and humorous messages which point to social and symbolic violence and interconnectedness of social struggles.
- The choice of several city locations according to applicable surfaces, availability, personal interaction, and history.
- Ephemerality of both street art and queer practices, where IYW is purposefully claiming public spaces for LGBTQ+ people, creating an internal critique of identity politics, and thinking outside the "gay box." This ephemerality is also a key difference from the majority of past and ongoing discussions on queer spaces which are predominantly focused on indoor spaces, or public ones such as parks and toilets (see: Betsky, 1997; Brent Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter, 1997; Furman and Mardell, 2022, Burmaz, 2017).

The intersection between street art, queer theory, and Serbia is rather a particular field. Street art has been well present in academia in the last twenty years with the internationally growing (and exploited) movement. Despite

the ongoing gender analyses, however, discussions about queer street art seem to be in its infancy. There is very little mention of Serbia in the global street art world (and a rather small amount of in-depth analyses from the region), while queer theory is well received in the academic sphere. Combining the three areas, it is my aim to try to bridge this gap between the fields and advocate for interconnectedness of issues on a glocal scale.² In approaching street art in general, I am echoing concerns by several researchers that street art needs to be approached in a contextualized and experiential way, especially in our era of overwhelming digitalization and popularization of street art (Bengtson, 2014, pp. 146–159; Velikonja, 2020a, p. 6; Lennon, 2021, p. 19; Waclawek, 2011, p. 61, 192). In following this advice, I draw on Mitja Velikonja's multimodal social semiotics framework (2020a, 38–56), which considers the message (content, artwork), the producer (artist), the place (physical context), and the responses (public). This approach can provide the researcher a more rounded, informed and contextualized insight. Ultimately, street interventions can contribute to the discussions on democracy, "right to the city," and social production of space, i.e. space that is both a product and means of production, as defined by Henri Lefebvre (see: Merrifield, 2006, pp. 59–77, 99–120; Velikonja, 2020a, p. 181). As a spatial practice that affects the perceived space, i.e. people's perception of their everyday world, it is socially constructed by living experiences of the urban dwellers who dialectically interact with it.

To achieve this inquiry, I implemented several methodological tools to contextualize Belgrade, collect the material, and demonstrate what makes public spaces really queer in IYW's case. Embodied research methodology emphasizes physical presence of the researcher and temporality in constructing shared social meanings with other people involved in the study and embodied experiences (Fransberg, Myllylä and Tolonen, 2021, p. 5). In this case, it includes my discussions with the artist and

1 - The term "gestures towards the importance of the spectator's encounter with the work in a situation quite unlike other forms of viewing art, the artist's interest in placing the work in public space rather than in a gallery, and the law's desire to situate the street artwork as legal or illegal" (Young, 2014, p. 8).

2 - From global and local, indicating interconnection of issues.

exploring the streets of Belgrade in person, both as a native speaker, guide, and a local. When it comes to the artworks, social semiotics is employed to understand social meanings and humor of IYW's messages (Sørensen, 2016, pp. 17–26; Velikonja, 2020a, pp. 48–50). This is supplemented by two interviews and several informal conversations with the artist. In collecting, selecting and analyzing the material, I relied on a mix of ethnographic, digital, and semiotic tools to understand IYW's choice of locations in a given space and viewers' potential encounter with them. These locations and IYW's artworks were geocoded, mapped and grouped by relying on several digital photo archives,³ artist's social media (Facebook and Instagram), and the use of Google maps. The latter was useful to see the wider street context and clusters of other artworks and messages nearby by way of Google's photographing Belgrade's street views in 2013 and 2014, during the IYW's initial peak period of activity. I would also like to highlight how this article is not just an attempt at documenting LGBTQ+ art-making, but also how the embodied methodology is an extension of the queer act itself, countering the erasure of LGBTQ+ voices and experiences. Before diving in the pug's wisdom, a brief overview of LGBTQ+ activism is necessary to situate IYW in recent history.

3. Socio-Political Framework

In the past two decades we have seen an almost schizophrenic process of retraditionalization under the banner of ethno-nationalism (which is essentially also against LGBTQ+ rights) and neoliberalism following European Union policies (Velikonja, 2020a, pp. 131–145). Against this broad backdrop, IYW's peak activity between 2014 and 2018 was marked by two cornerstone events: a third successful Pride parade in 2014, after which no further Pride parades were banned or prevented until today, and the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first gay/lesbian prime minister of Serbia in 2017. While these events have contributed to better visibility and a more stable

presence of LGBTQ+ community in Serbia, it is paramount to question this ultimately false sense that LGBTQ+ rights have been finally won.

Communicating any LGBTQ+ topics and issues in public spaces in Serbia in the last twenty years was risky in multiple ways. The overwhelming hate speech created a very toxic and challenging environment to work with and in (Labris, 2005; Sabo, 2014; Bilić & Kajinić, 2016; Canakis & Kersten-Pejanić, 2016; Kisić, 2020). This atmosphere significantly influenced LGBTQ+ artistic expressions and culture in Belgrade, and Serbia overall. Many initiatives were semi-public, if not entirely private, looking to create a safe space for expression in the private sphere. Other, more radical initiatives challenged the status quo by *poking the bear*,⁴ and speaking up about problematic issues in the public, at least for a short period of time. Several researchers have argued that this temporality and resistance to heteronormativity aided to form specific *queer spaces*. Whether these spaces are constructed for queer consumption from the start or appropriated for this particular use, they are constantly negotiated between public and private, experiential, impermanent and unstable in their meaning and use (Betsky, 1997, p. 18; Brent Ingram, 1997, pp. 27–31; Burmaz, 2017; Furman & Mardell, 2022, p. x). Having this in mind, *ephemera is evidence*, as José Esteban Muñoz famously said, that can help us understand queer acts of resistance and sociability (Muñoz 1996, p. 6, 10). It is also a link to another form of temporal practice—street art.

Despite the political and community potential, intersections between street art and LGBTQ+ rights and creativity worldwide seem to exist in the margins, outside the mainstream. However, during the 2000s, with the proliferation of LGBTQ+ initiatives and public controversies,⁵ the street became an important place for resistance against violence and homophobia. Many protest messages in public space by self-organized individuals

3 - Aside from my own collection, I relied on the material from the artist and from my street art colleagues Ljiljana Radošević and Aleksandar Đalek Đorđević, courtesy of Street Art Belgrade.

4 - A common expression *Ne čačkaj mečku* (Do not poke the bear) means do not look for trouble.

5 - Such as the first Pride parade in 2001, which was poorly secured and ended up in violence against the participants and police protecting the gathering.

and groups provided critical visibility of the LGBTQ+ community and issues, countering the populist homophobic discourse. To approach some of these examples, I am relying in the definition of queer by David J. Getsy, as a strategic artistic practice of queering relations, creating subversions and different kinships, resisting heteronormativity, and defying oppression in a performative way (2016, pp. 12–16). Following Getsy's conceptualization of queering relations, we need to take into consideration an entire network of meanings and resistance, which is both social and aesthetical.

In Serbia, both *gej* (gay) and *kvir* (queer) are loanwords from Western Europe and the United States, gaining popularity in the 2000s. Within the history of LGBTQ+ activism in Serbia, *kvir* has often been employed strategically, as an innovative, self-reflective, politically charged and critical call for radical action (Maljković, 2013; Blagojević & Dimitrijević, 2014, pp. 9–12; Petković, 2015, pp. 52–56). One of the noteworthy example of the locally contextualized and critical appropriation of queer was *QueerBeograd Cabaret* from the latter half of 2000s. According to various researchers (Bilić & Dioli, 2016; Marjanović, 2017), the *QueerBeograd* collective playfully translated queer into *kvar* (malfunction), “pointing to a malfunction in hegemonic regimes, and queer politics as the politics of interconnectedness” (Marjanović, 2017, p. 4). Overall, their approach was relational and based on political solidarity, avoiding pigeonholing themselves on a single issue or exclusive gender and sexual identity issues (Bilić & Dioli, 2016, pp. 110–112; Marjanović, 2017, pp. 92–98, 238–246). Having this intersectional perspective in mind, I argue that *queer/kvar* can be useful in interpreting Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled's creations. From 2014 to 2018, IYW served as a proxy for Nikša in continuing the legacy and activism of past queer initiatives and collectives. Additionally, Nikša also queered the streets in Belgrade by communicating messages promoting queer relationally, a non-normative of sociality, that went beyond identity politics and included commentaries concerning established systems of power and exclusion (such as the trans community, people living with HIV, migrants, homophobia and hate speech).

4. Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled

To avoid any possible confusion, I am using the word *street art* in a very narrow sense. Street art is a type of contemporary art made at the intersection of graffiti subculture and fine arts techniques, operating in public spaces. It is ephemeral, done both with and without permission, with larger communicative potential in regards to the general public than graffiti since it employs clear messages and/or characters (See: Waclawek, 2011, p. 3, 65; Radošević, 2013, pp. 1–13; Young, 2014, pp. 2–4; Bengtsen, 2014, pp. 11–13, 131–164). IYW's beginnings lie with one of the most influential street artists in Serbia, *TKV–The Kraljica Vila* (The Fairy Queen). She and a few of other female artists introduced street art in Serbia when the first stencils appeared in Belgrade in 2004. Since then, she has been called the Queen, as graffiti writers would say, with an art career that often intersects with activism. In 2012, TKV participated in a project and workshop called *Rodno čitanje grada* (Gendered Readings of the City), which aimed to support young activists. Nikša, who would later create Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled, took part in the workshop, a crucial point in his path to activism (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022; Sabo, 2014, p. 393). As one of the results, a team of participants, including Nikša himself, realized an independent project called *Mesto za ljubljenje* (Kissing Area), which operated from the end of 2012 to 2014 (Stošić, 2015, pp. 42–43). The idea behind *Kissing area* was to mark metaphorical safe spaces in the city, placing them on public sidewalks and in parks. The authors created a stencil that marked the four corners, representing the walls of a room, or a brick triangle forming a house (see Figure 1), framing an inscription which is (usually) the very name of the project in Serbian. This form was playing with the common homophobic saying that LGBTQ+ people should keep to themselves in their own four walls.

However, according to our interview, at some point Nikša became dissatisfied with the project, as its essentially pro-LGBTQ+ and non-heteronormative messages appeared unclear and people were appropriating the popular stencils as romantic urban spots (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022). Aside from *Kissing Area*, he was also working solo under the pseudonym *Nique Chat*. Some of his early street interventions were playful and



Figure 1: Mesto za ljubljenje / Kissing area, 2014 [stencil]. Belgrade, Manjež park.

humorous counter renditions of homophobic messages and stencils depicting a Freddie Mercury figure/portrait. With his newfound knowledge of stencil-making and LGBTQ+ activism, he very soon came up with a new project. That was the time IYW was born. As in previous examples of LGBTQ+ artivism, Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled used the medium of stencils to communicate a combination of text and images, this time coupled with speech balloons drawn by hand with markers. The dominant image in the stencil is a pug called Yoda (Figure 2), an adopted pet dog of Nikša (Figure 3). The name comes from Yoda from Star Wars, referring not only to the outward appearance of both characters, but also to

their age. Together, they embody IYW in a human-animal collaboration. The dog not only served as an inspiration for the character, but also accompanied Nikša to almost all of his street interventions and served as a mouthpiece for his messages. To paraphrase Nikša, “it was as if I was imagining what Yoda would say to all these [homophobic and hate] messages we were encountering during our walks” (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022). The stenciled pug is predominantly life-size, positioned either within the reach of Yoda the dog (often emphasized on IYW’s social media accounts),⁶ or within the average line of sight of us humans.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/inspektoryoda>, https://www.instagram.com/realnost_ujeda/.



Figure 2: Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani, 2014 [stencil]. Freddie Mercury & Yoda. Belgrade. Source: Nikša Herman.

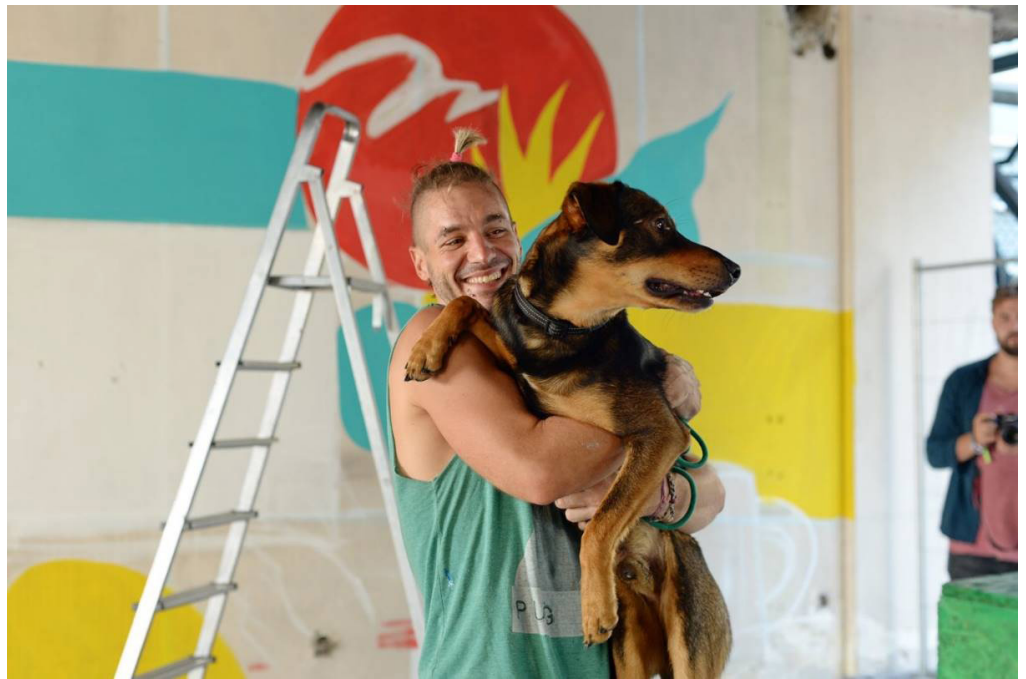


Figure 3: Nikša Herman, 2019. Festival Rekonstrukcija 2019. Source: Marija Konjikušić, Ognjen Ranković, Ana Danilović.

Pug's multifaceted and repetitive image made this street alter ego a true character tag, at once of recognizable authorship and anonymity, a common feature in the world of graffiti and street art (Wacławek, 2011, pp. 12–16, 32–38). According to our interview, TKV's colorful stencils and paste-ups of strong women inspired his approach, as did Shepard Fairey's *Obey Giant* stickers. In both cases, both artists covered the city with their characters, creating persistent and alternative advertising with a sense of mystery. As in the case of *Obey Giant*, Nikša did not sign their pieces. In a way, the passer-by needs to know who the artist is in advance. One could argue that the choice of a dog entices several interpretations. Dogs are present in the streets of Belgrade, as desirable pets or unwanted strays. Symbolically, "marking the territory" is often associated with the dogs' scent-marking of a territory, as well as social groups such as gangs and sports fans, and by extension, graffiti writers' tagging. Interestingly, unlike many of the aforementioned groups, IYW avoided macho sense of territoriality: "I consider myself a peace-loving lunatic and that's somehow a story that I figured out sits well with people and the authorities [...]" (Nikša in Herman & Jovanović, 2016). Graffiti and street art, through the action of tagging and "bombing" (i.e. covering a large area with the writer's signature/character), are also a way of visually and symbolically claiming the public space. And with a queer perspective in mind, it is a way of claiming space, asking for cultural validation and breaking the silence about one's existence (Getsy, 2016, p. 44, 79).

According to Nikša, Yoda the dog helped him to overcome some challenging personal situation, and by taking care of the animal, he was empowered to make positive changes in his own life and in his immediate environment (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022). The motivation was to confront indifference and ignorance, to fight violence and hatred, and "start with something positive" (Nikša in Marčetić, 2014). IYW was mainly active from the end of 2014 until 2018, when the dog passed away. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic,

he made only a few stencils with Yoda in 2020, and has a large number of messages pending for years that he wanted to put up. Since then, Nikša has been trying to continue his work, possibly with a different approach and a new character. Until that happens, there is a large body of past work that deserves our attention. Some of the key aspects of public interventions that IYW introduced were a combination of: an amiable character; clear, critical and diverse messages; humor and wit in playing with words and meanings; queering the public space; and a continuous production. The little pug is an instantly recognizable image, deliberately cute and benevolent. It stands as the artist's surrogate, a proxy, and a messenger. As is typical for stencils, the messages are clearly written, in uppercase lettering, in Latin script,⁷ and mostly in Serbian. The aim was to reach a large audience in public spaces, by using this alternative media of street art. Care is also taken with the surface underneath to make the message legible, using markers to contrast with the background color.

While activism can sometimes seem dull in its seriousness and utilitarianism, it does not necessarily have to be. Humor operates in a social, cognitive and emotional ways that allow activists to playfully and publicly critique power (Sørensen, 2016, 7–9). When activists use it to destabilize dominant ideas, in a discursive guerilla warfare, they can galvanize public opinion and offer alternatives to the prevailing order of things (Sørensen, 2016, 21–22). However, many of these humorous and political stunts suffer from a lack of continuity. They often respond to a particular political event or cases of discrimination and do not continue with their engagement (Hvala, 2008). The situation is quite different in the case of IYW who maintained a public production for a number of years. Entering into this production is not an easy feat. In contrast to the *Kissing area*, IYW communicated a larger body of content. After reviewing the artist's social profiles and personal archive, out of nearly 200 unique messages, about 30% is related to everyday sayings and general positive messages, 30% question gender and sexuality, and the last 30% are some

7 - Serbia has two scripts, Cyrillic and Latin, but only the former is officially recognized. By choosing the Latin one, IYW could have resisted the nationalist rhetoric and aimed to make the messages more readable to international audience.



Figure 4: Mesto za ljubljenje / Kissing area, 2013 [stencil]. *Другачију па шта?*. Belgrade, Braće Krsmanović street. Source: Nikša Herman.



Figure 5: Google maps image of Braće Krsmanović street (Spanish house and GRAD yard), Savamala, November 2014. Source: <https://tinyurl.com/3ex7py53>.

sort of a social critique.⁸ They range from pop culture references, social media (mis)use, and everyday sayings, to social critique, gender expectations, and animal rights (Marčetić, 2014; Belčević, 2015; Danilović, 2017, p. 90). Most of them employ a combination of wit and humor, often subverting the meaning of words by revealing alternative or transgressive meanings. Nikša tagged the city, relying on the interplay between the message, the location, the available surface and the inspiration. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the physical public space as a space of production

and communication of messages when analyzing street art.

Given the large number of messages, I will focus on two city areas—Savamala and Dorćol—and several individual pieces to discuss IYW's placement and meaning-making in interaction with the surrounding context. Both of these areas had a significant presence of IYW's artworks, reactions to their messages, other street pieces in close proximity, and are well documented.

8 - This number does not include how many times a given message was reproduced in streets.



Figure 6: IYW, 2014 [stencils]. *Femmenalno* & *Pis mačo*. Belgrade, Braće Krsmanović street. Source: Aleksandar Đalek Đorđević (Street Art Belgrade).

5. *Femmenalno*: Marking an LGBTQ+ Friendly Zone and Deconstructing Gender

Once a bustling transport hub adorned with buildings featuring a blend of secession and academicism architectural styles, the area along the nearby Sava river fell into neglect after WWII. Things started to change in the late 2000s with the arrival of several cultural initiatives like the Magacin Cultural Centre and the GRAD – European Centre for Culture and Debate. These pioneering institutions moved into the noisy, dirty and dilapidated neighborhood. The area experienced a rich artistic and

cultural revitalization during the 2010s, but gentrification interrupted it in with the emergence/emplacement of the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project (Wright, 2015).⁹ In addition to the arts, the neighborhood gained recognition for its nightlife, clubs, independent, and LGBTQ+ venues (such as Apartman club) (Burmaz, 2017, pp. 111–165). Nikša's activity in Savamala started in late 2013, with *Kissing Area*, and then independently from 2014. This takes place at a time when the artistic scene was still flourishing, right before the Belgrade Waterfront demolition and construction took place.

9 - "Belgrade is painfully divided about the development. Some see a prosperous future in it, others are aghast at the project's hitherto-alien cityscape, unconvinced of its economic or social benefits and suspicious of Serbia's relationship with Eagle Hills" (Wright, 2016). The project also criticized for its untransparent decision-making, corruption, opposition from the urban professionals, displacement of temporary refugee camp, removal of artistic initiatives and small businesses, and gentrification.

IYW's messages are located on Braće Krsmanović Street, mainly near the cultural center GRAD and abandoned so-called Spanish House (*Španska kuća*). GRAD is an independent space that engages in a variety of cultural activities, and has been an important LGBTQ+ ally supporting initiatives such as BeFem and IDAHO Belgrade. As such, it was often tagged with pro-LGBTQ+ content. In a way, we can say that the queer presence was “spilling over” to the street, making the safe space visible and engaging with passers-by. One of the early examples of LGBTQ+ messages is the appearance of the *Kissing Area*'s stencils in late 2013, at the time when Yoda the pug started showing up on IYW's social media as a street (art) character and Nikša's accomplice. A stencil with the words *Feminističko mesto* (Feminist area) was painted on the ground in front of GRAD and other city locations, to promote the upcoming BeFem festival. Another *Kissing Area* stencil with the message *Другачију па шта?* (Different, so what?) was also painted on the wall of building (Figure 4). Interestingly, this is one of the rare inscriptions they made in the Cyrillic alphabet, the script which is often associated with the traditional, nationalist and official cultural discourse. The usage here could be strategic move to challenge tradition by appropriating its (stereotypical) script and creating a fissure for alternative readings. By placing these stencils next to GRAD, the authors of *Kissing Area* strengthened the existing location as feminist.

Nearby, around the half-collapsed Spanish house, IYW continued this thread in 2014 with a series of messages that deliberately play with and deconstruct expected and traditional gender stereotypes. *Ovde je butchno* plays with the words *butch* and *bučno* (loud), referring to the more masculine lesbian butch identity. Of the two examples I know, both are located not only near LGBTQ+ spaces but also near clubs, whose music is often heard from the street. Through this intervention, IYW seems to signal a coded connection between the often protective indoor safe LGBTQ+ social spaces and the sometimes threatening outdoor world, but it can also be a comment on the loud nightclubs or the amount of noise that this busy transportation hub was experiencing at the time (Figure 5).

Several IYW messages address the stigma of HIV, which is still widely regarded as a virus that predominantly affects the gay population. Breaking the taboo in a playful fashion, one found in Savamala says *HIV sloveni*. Here IYW referred to the previous, socialist Yugoslav anthem *Hej, sloveni* (Hey, Slavs), which was used from 1943 until 2006. Catchy and subversive, the message has both a historical-cultural reference and acknowledges the visibility of people with HIV among the Slavs (including Serbs).

Next, in a corner between GRAD and the Spanish House features a closely knit group of three stencils on concrete blocks and a wall (Figures 6 & 7). *Hejteroseksualci* (Heterosexuals) is a twist on *heterosexuals*. In an act of deliberate mislabeling, the artist problematizes being straight based on hate towards minorities. *Pis mačo* (Shoo macho) plays with the words *mačo* (macho) and *maco* (pussy cat), where instead of shooing a cat (*Pis maco*) one does so with aggressive masculinity, weakening its power. *Femmenalno* blends *fenomenalno* (phenomenal) and *femme*, equating exceptionality with women. All three can be seen as a critique of masculinity and aggressive heterosexuality which is essentially patriarchal. These messages are surrounded by another three pieces done by different artists around that time---most seem to be following a general pro-LGBTQ+ thread. (Figure 7). However, someone crossed over parts of IYW's messages and INK's figure with red spray paint, which Nikša attributed to football fans and hooligans from the Red Star club (their signature colors being red and white), one of the common and most visible anti-LGBTQ+ groups at the time (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022). He restored the messages back to their original form. Nearby, in at least three spots on Braće Krsmanović street (including GRAD) one could see several variations of threatening inscriptions *П*дер неће сметати* (F*g will not walk), made prior to the 2014 Pride parade.¹⁰ In another, this time positive twist, someone changed them to *П*дер неће сметати* (F*g won't bother) and adding heart symbols (Figure 9), neutralizing the harmful language and threat, and symbolically defending the area.

10 - Also accompanied by: *П*д[е]р градом неће сметати* (F*g won't walk around the city) and *Смрт п*дерима* (Death to f*gs).



Figure 7: INK, c. 2014 [stencil], *Enid*; IYW, 2014 [stencil], *Hejteroseksualci*; Anđela Mujčić, 2014 [stencil], *A koga ti voliš?*; КРИШКА, c. 2014 [mural], *What?*. Belgrade, Braće Krsmanović street. Source: Aleksandar Đalek Đorđević (Street Art Belgrade).



Figure 8: Anonymous, 2014 [stencil]. *Feminist Jesus*. Belgrade, Braće Krsmanovića street. Source: Aleksandar Đalek Đorđević (Street Art Belgrade).



Figure 9: Google maps image of Braće Krsmanović street 7, Savamala, November 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/ysnsfkkh>.

Most likely the same perpetrators crossed over another, complex activist stencil (Figures 12 & 13). Depicting a ninja warrior figure with Jesus Christ's head, together with a halo and anarchy symbol, in a pose ready to fight, it reads: *Јеванђеље по мутант панк феминисти Исусу: 'Нека буде Прајда' и би Прајд (1:3-5)* (Gospel according to mutant punk feminist Jesus reads: "Let there be Pride" and there was Pride). Just like *Kissing Area's Different, so what?*, the author of this stencil strategically used the Cyrillic script to undermine nationalism. It fuses religion, popular culture, and leftist ideology to advertise the forthcoming Pride, mock Christianity's blind spot when it comes to the LGBTQ+ population, and offer a fictitious, alternative savior. Unfortunately, possibly because of the religious connotations, none of these stencils lasted for long. Another of IYW's pieces which remained intact seems to comment on this situation, targeting the anti-LGBTQ+ and nationalistic discourse, *Neznanje rađa strah* (Ignorance gives birth to fear). In other areas of the city this message was sometimes coupled with *Strah rađa nasilje* (Fear gives birth to violence).

All of these elements, which might appear like a cacophony of voices, emphasize an ongoing street art spray can discursive guerilla war, fighting for visibility and attention between two opposing sides. On the one hand, IYW's and other similar messages can be interpreted as a means of claiming existent queer spaces and queering the public space. In the case of locations which have a prior LGBTQ+ history or contemporary social use, but which are often obscured for protection and privacy sake, IYW was contributing to their coded visibility. On the other hand, everyday public locations which are not explicitly associated with the LGBTQ+ population were queered by inserting queer subjects and topics in a space where they are unexpected, suppressed or invisible.

6. *Sada je najlepše: Countering the Hate*

A great example is the Dorćol neighborhood with several sports fan and aggressive football hooligan practices of tagging the public space and IYW's response to them. Dorćol is an old neighborhood, with a rich history and multicultural heritage (Austrian, Jewish, Muslim), located in a prime location between the very center and Danube river. Territorially, it has been divided into upper and lower Dorćol, where sport fans of Partizan (called *grobari*, gravediggers) claim the upper, and fans of Crvena Zvezda (*delije*, warriors/braves) claim the lower part. Both groups of these two biggest sport clubs in Serbia use graffiti, murals and street art for marketing and to extend their reach, physically and symbolically. Hooligans at the time were generally notorious for street violence, homophobia, and their political and criminal ties (Danilović, 2017, 52–62; Velikonja, 2020a, 273–326). In a few instances, IYW decided to counter and address their messages that sometimes oversaturated the streets. Given that Dorćol was Nikša's and Yoda's primary home at the time, we can see the pugs as a way to reclaim the public space.

In several interventions IYW reacted upon the already existing hate speech, with the strategy to "decontaminate" the streets (Velikonja, 2020a, p. 53; Velikonja, 2020b, p. 280). While this strategy erased, blurred, or simply crossed over hate messages, contributing to a wall palimpsest, anonymous public feedback can also reveal multiple readings of a given message. Originally reproduced in several locations, standing solo or reacting to a nearby hate message, *J*beš p*dere* (F*ck f*gs) from 2014 received a special treatment (Figure 10, 2014). According to Nikša, the motivation was to react to a set of nearby hooligan graffiti by Partizan fans, which were aggressively claiming the area with their signature black color (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022). Looking at Google maps, the area is full of them—the closest ones are sexist *Jer lepa si do mog*, territorial ГД, football *PFC/ПФК*, and a nationalistic stencil *Пишу ћириницом*. IYW's message *J*beš p*dere* (F*ck f*gs) explicitly reflected the dual-meaning, implicating both the sexual intercourse (as attraction or aggression) and indifference.



Figure 10: IYW, 2014 [stencil]. *J*beš p*dere* (photographed in 2017). Belgrade, Gospodar Jevremova street.



Figure 11: Google maps, corner of Gospodar Jevremova and Višnjićeva streets, November 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/t89zfv72>.



Figure 12: Google maps, Visokog Stevana street, November 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/yck8p49m>.



Figure 13: IYW, 2017 [stencil]. *Sada je najljepše*. Belgrade, Visokog Stevana street. Source: Nikša Herman.

Possibly because the speech bubble used a derogatory word, somebody reacted crossing over in red spray the word *p*dere* and wrote *homofobiju!*, thus changing the message to *J*beš homofobiju!* (F*ck homophobia!). In this interesting twist, with an exclamation mark, the sexual agency and critical indifference is again targeting the homophobic sentiment.

In an additional twist, two police officers caught Nikša in the act, asking him why he was writing a seemingly homophobic message on the wall (Belčević, 2015). Located on a wall in a

small street overlooking the memorial Museum of Vuk and Dositej and kindergarten Mestašće, as well as the nearby Mihailo Petrović Alas elementary school, it was no wonder he caught the police’s attention (Figure 11).

Reacting against hate is only one strategy. Apart from clear activist messages, a large part of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled’s opus are everyday sayings, spontaneous jokes and “spreading positivity” (Nikša in Marčetić, 2014). One of the positive stencils is *Sada je najljepše* (Now’s the best time)

from 2017 (Figure 13). According to Nikša, this “*saying which our grandmothers used*” indicates a state or situation when all is well (N. Herman, personal communication, February 5, 2022). What is interesting is that one of the versions of this stencil found its way to an unlikely place, a football fan mural in their own territory. Near Nikša’s neighborhood, lower Dorćol, many walls and almost entire residential blocks have been marked as belonging to one of the largest sport clubs in Serbia, Crvena Zvezda (Red Star. Figure 12). IYW wanted to test their territoriality by placing another *Sada je najlepše* stencil on their wall, while respecting the existing color scheme (red and white). Some young fans spotted him during the act, but due to his benevolent behavior and message, let him go unharmed. In a way, IYW managed to make a lasting physical and symbolic intervention within the space which is usually extremely homophobic. Seeing this message in its contextual use, I think IYW created a potent double-alternative: both to violent or overly politicized messages on Belgrade’s walls, and the sometimes prevalent victim discourse of the LGBTQ+ community.

These examples can be interpreted as cases of *kvar*—malfunction of logic, expectations, normative relationships and “common,” “public” opinion, that are reflected/inscribed/reproduced into urban space. That is, purposefully challenging the alleged neutrality and objectivity of these everyday notions which have been hijacked by ultra-right nationalism, coupled with social solidarity and antifascist sentiment. When everyday discourse reproduces violence and homophobia (Blagojević & Dimitrijević, 2014, p. 11), IYW’s guerilla war interventions create ruptures in the dominant discourse by confronting the passersby. The value of these actions is not just in reacting publicly against hate and condemning violence, but also in challenging the desensitization of the public, where these hate messages remain unsanctioned or unquestioned in the streets for a long time. As we had a chance to see, many messages in public spaces made under the ultra-right wing or “banal nationalist” (Velikonja, 2020a, p. 103) pretext are violent in content or call for violence, contributing to a toxic and fearful atmosphere targeting certain minorities. According to Velikonja, in regards to nationalism, “[s]arcastically speaking, there is always someone to hate” (Velikonja, 2020a, p. 105). Street art can challenge apathy (Lewisohn,

2011, pp. 10–11), by giving a public voice to a certain social group, a counter-narrative, and as such is inherently a democratic and political act.

7. Conclusion

I mean, a police officer asked me, “do you truly think you’re going to change anything by doing what you do?” [...] I don’t think so but I can’t be silent anymore, I mean... somehow I think that there’s been enough silence. You can only be silent for so long (Nikša in Herman & Jovanović, 2016).

Reviewing Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled’s activism, I want to underline that this little pug is a symbol of hope. While the physical stencils have mostly been erased by now, its messages resonated with the public and are still relevant in today’s Serbian society. As we have seen, marginalization, stigmatization and violence towards the LGBTQ+ community have been reproduced in public space, physically and symbolically. Having a critical minoritarian voice in this setting has great potential to create fissures in this context, reacting against desensitization of the general public, confronting the hate messages, and presenting a discourse of its own. IYW is one of those voices who was queering the streets, destabilizing “the common sense,” questioning gender norms, challenging the status quo, and providing alternative gender and social relations.

In his public work, Nikša pointed to the real elephant in the room—the *heterosexuals* who oversaturate the area with their tagging which often remain unchallenged. Popular explanation is that there is no money to whitewall and decorate the old facades, where some owners might be just preparing a fresh clean wall for next taggers, but I think the underlying reason might be simple desensitization and apathy. In other words, the citizens do not notice the discriminatory language anymore, it all becomes white noise in an environment already filled with public advertising. While this might suggest the hate messages are semi-neutralized, even abandoned by not being erased or reacted upon, their content continues to spread and “contaminate” the environment.

Nikša’s own personal empowerment was intentionally reflected in his immediate surroundings: the city of



Figure 14: IYW, 2014 or 2015 [stencil]. *Ne trans*fobiši trans*formiši se* & *I will not apologize for (t)art* (photographed in 2018). Source: Aleksandar Đalek Đorđević (Street Art Belgrade).

Belgrade, artistic, activist and queer circles. This enabled a certain temporal queer space, interwoven in the everyday fabric of the city. By expanding the focus outside of “pure” LGBTQ+ topics and activism, IYW managed to tackle some intersectional potential which reflected not only Nikša’s interests, but also the interconnection of struggles. After all, the same urban space is shared by a variety of social groups and individuals encompassing multiple identities, which all points to an awareness of the local context and belonging. As a queer space (Doderer, 2011), it reflects an aesthetic choice, teaches us that the space is in constant production, but also fosters minoritarian politics of visibility and brings the private into the public as a means to face prejudices (Getsy, 2016, p. 16, 78).

Finally, Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled brought play and positivity into the gray city which might be overlooked looking at the sometimes grim messages they were reacting to. Therefore, it is important to shift the weight from pure discrimination, hate and violence (or reaction to it), towards this discourse which brings and supports critical hope. After all, despite the fact that a little pug could not change society, their example challenged desensitization and apathy, which serves as the groundwork for resistance. I will conclude with a combination of a few of their inspirational messages: *I will not apologize for (t)art*, *It’s easy to say what’s wrong*, *Let’s start with something positive*, *Don’t trans*phobe yourself*, *trans*form yourself* (Figure 14), *Take (creative) care of yourself*, *You are nature’s masterpiece*, and *Be realistic, demand the impossible*.¹¹

11 - *Lako je reći šta ne valja; Krenimo od onog što je dobro; Ne trans*fobiši se, trans*formiši se; St(v)araj se o sebi*—a wordplay on *stvarati* (create) and *starati* (take care); *Ti si remek delo prirode*; and *Budimo realni zahtevajmo nemoguće*, an old slogan from 1968 student revolt.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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