

The Expression of Free Opinion through Graffiti and Murals in Kosovo and Serbia

Ilir Muharremi

Professor at University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina, Faculty of Education, Kosovo

Email Address: ilir.muharremi@uni-pr.edu

Albana Krasniqi

Corresponding author Professor at University of Peja "Haxhi Zeka", Kosovo

Email Address: albanakrasniqi2@hotmail.com

Atlanta Balidemaj

Student at "Iona University"- New Rochelle, New York, United States of America

Email Address: abalidemaj5@gaels.iona.edu

Abstract

This work addresses the art of graffiti and murals in Kosovo and Serbia. Is graffiti political or not political? Are the murals in Kosovo and Serbia addressing similar political subjects? How much influence do the works of art possess? Murals and graffiti express culture in both Kosovo and Serbia. In Serbia, depictions of war leaders are on the walls of buildings all over the country. In Kosovo, how are the topics of the last war presented? Do real social themes influence the depictions of the murals? The graffiti and mural works in Kosovo are different from those in Serbia. Serbs still depict war themes in both graffiti and murals but in Kosovo, the topics are freer, still maintaining their subjectiveness to current political, social, economic, and legal topics. Free speech is as free as it is in murals and graffiti in two neighboring states that are American to each other.

Keywords

Art, mural, graffiti, work, culture, legal

1. Introduction

Graffiti and mural artists in Kosovo do not live in absolute freedom regarding expressing their personal thoughts, but still, they dive deeper and deeper into the current political topics of the country. Issues brought up only further emphasize social and economic life, such as issues with groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. A few decades ago, graffiti and simple inscriptions, mostly requested by a large population in the country, depicting protest or worship, sometimes accompanied by illustration/drawing, appeared at night in the biggest cities, while their authors, for many reasons, remained anonymous. This was a basic form of what later became mural art. In that world, there was no law or

regulation that would enable talented artists, amateurs or professionals, to legally, through mural art, express their feelings for an occurrence, respect for any personality, cynicism, affirmative attitude or humor for any event, or even simply give a message.

Today, mural art is legal, moreover, especially in urban environments, it is encouraged. In Kosovo, there are now several non-governmental organizations that gather young artists, who with their skills decorate the gray space of half-ruined buildings or underpasses, rough concrete fences near the streets, and the walls of institutions or cafeterias. In Kosovo, the most engaged organization is Mural Fest, which was created in 2016 as an artistic project from which the association was later created. Through murals, Mural Fest uses

art as a form of speech and the propagation of social justice. Does art have the power to unite two peoples, the Serbs, and the Albanians, in this case? Do the artists themselves think that this is possible? Two peoples in conflict with each other who, although through art, can feel the union and live well. Nothing should be forgotten about what happened in Kosovo during the last war, but the new generations today should think about the future of the two states and there should be thoughts of peaceful cooperation. Art bridges, especially murals, and graffiti, can aid this solution to be possible.

It seems that Serb artists are still living in the spirit of 1998-99, their artwork showing clear influence by local politics. This is best emphasized by the creation of Ratko Mladić's mural, in the center of Belgrade, where two other murals are also displayed: that of the Chetnik commander of the Second World War, Drazha Mihajlović, and of the Duke of Serbia during the First World War, Živojin Mišić. Mihajlović's figure is drawn on the side wall of the same residential building, where Mladić's mural has been for four months now. Next to the portrait of Mihajlović, the verses of the Chetnik song "Everyone is a guard" are written. Meanwhile, the figure of Mišić is drawn on another building opposite, the Serbian flag also displayed. Since unknown authors painted the mural of Mladić, four months ago, the citizens have painted over it several times, but the mural has always returned to its original state within a few hours. Mural art has been used in Kosovo since before the war, as a method to "beautify" the gray areas of the city and to spread political messages. These murals display the concept of freedom of expression and how much influence political artists have had on the creation of murals in Kosovo. Many political regimes have used and continue to use art for political purposes, consciously using art to shape the consciousness of their population. On the other hand, many resistance movements do the same, often with much better aesthetic results than what the state produces. Political powers have largely shaped the various disciplines of art history, and those arts that have survived from the past are here today because political powers have allowed it.

Thus, we can say that the history of art and the history of graffiti and murals is compatible with the corresponding political regime. When the political regime begins to produce aesthetic objects, it tries to make them eternal. We do not

identify political systems and ideologies exclusively with a series of different statements, but with their entire aesthetic embodiment as a whole, in which case we also place the text in the field of aesthetics. We can say that any political system at the given moment with signs can be indexed with its aesthetic embodiment. On the other hand, it cannot be said as a whole about the function of art in the framework of politics that it belongs to the field of propaganda or the spread of certain rhetoric. That relationship between art and politics is constitutive. The political system consists of its aesthetic embodiments where the relationship between the leader and his followers is largely shaped by the aesthetic system, the creation of which is worked very carefully. In other words, if we want to talk about politics, we cannot ignore aesthetics, and conversely, every aspect of aesthetics is inevitably politicized. Both of these notions, aesthetics and politics, cannot be examined separately, but are notions that function as a whole. Each policy has its own aesthetic embodiment, and each aesthetic is preceded by politics. Aesthetic attitudes are acquired during life, while their creation is worked through different education systems, which are, logically, conditioned by the political regime.

2. Graffiti art and murals in Kosovo with libertarian and social influence

Viewed from an aesthetic point of view, the artist is a purveyor of aesthetic experience, including those intended to frustrate or modify the viewer's aesthetic sensibility. The subject of aesthetic experience is the master, while the artist is the servant. This means that the artist has the obligation to present content, themes, motives, narratives, etc., which are decided by religious or political powers. Today the artist deals with topics of public interest. Democratic opinion wants to find in art the representation of issues, different topics, political controversies and social trends, which the public starts from everyday life. The politicization of art is often seen as the antidote to the purely aesthetic stance, which supposedly requires art to be simply beautiful. We can say more about this in Serbia, which has more of a public influence whereas, in Kosovo, the opposite dominates in the art of murals and graffiti, but not necessarily every time artists use free themes in murals.



Fig 1. The mural “Dashuri eshte Dashuri eshte Dashuri” (Love is Love is Love), outside the College of Philosophy at the University of Pristina in Kosovo.

In this mural, two very special people, warmly embracing each other, now dominate the university campus against a pure orange background. It represents the LGBTQ+ community in Kosovo, Qerkica, and Mustafa, who through this mural were immortalized in the collective memory of Pristina. Qerkica is an Ashkali transgender woman, who is well known to the Albanian public, especially to LGBTQ+ people. Her activism consists mainly in existence, in the power and courage to challenge any social norm and to manifest her gender identity in the face of systematic denial and annihilation. The friendship between Qerkica and Mustafa, and their pure love for LGBTQ+ people, will now be able to inspire all the residents of Pristina who pass near the Faculty of Philosophy in Pristina, where this mural was erected. The compositional part of this mural shows the warmth of a sincere love between two men. One has his eyes closed

while the other experiences the warmth with his eyes open. The orange color in the background shows an embodiment of warmth between them, tenderness. The anatomy is created by realistic art emphasizing even the finest details of the musculature. Street art can be a reflection of who will be in the public eye, becoming a movement. A reflection on what the marginalized can teach us, if we are willing to listen. It is an artistic intervention starting with the mural, emphasizing the time to challenge the marginalization and erasure of gender, sexual and ethnic minorities from public spaces. The artists invite the public to explore what seemingly unusual relationships can teach us about respect, solidarity and our common humanity.



Fig 2. "Fyelltari", Ibrahim Kodra's mural in Pristina.

This work by Ibrahim Kodra is located near the Palace of Youth in Pristina. It breaks the gloom, ugliness and rough monotony of a rusted metal behind which power cables lie. This fiddler with a robot head, in addition to making the sounds of the fiddle, also gives lectures on Albanian music, showing the Albanian spiritual inspiration that Kodra had. This mural with cool colors and other expresses that artistic essence of a deep force with intuition and example beyond the time in which the artist lived. But, even today, this motive with the spirit of cubist art makes the pupils of the eyes sting. Kodra asked "How many currents of art exist? There are only two of them and they were born in Greece, by Aristotle and by Plato." But, according to Aristotle, nature is not imitable, it is not perfect and man cannot do it. Then, it remains for the artist to take from nature and remake it according to his taste. Contrarily, Plato thinks that human pleasure is to imitate nature. The interpretation of nature, the creation of its symphonies by the artist leads us to something beautiful that master Kodra adored. His great spirit from a desolate and small country is seen in this mural, culture and heritage is conveyed through this medium, creating artistic patriotism. This proves that wher-

ever the artist is, he carries homeland, heritage and culture in his heart. "When I die, I want a stone from Albania and one from Kosovo to be placed on my gallows," said Kodra. This face of this fiddler can be my life, yours, ours, this is Kodra, but it is all of us, so at that time but also in today's time, man was worn out and his ideals are sailing towards the world of robots. "Cultivating art means staying young", said Kodra. The influence of Pablo Picasso is also noticeable in this work.

The mural with the portrait of the icon of Albanian music, Nexhmije Pagarusha, gives life to the space behind the Ministry of Culture and near the Kosovo Philharmonic. It was created by two artists from Spain, within the framework of MuralFest, a festival which, with the work being done over the years, is giving color to the cities of Kosovo. Brought to life in the mural, depicts the singer's beautiful face- one of femininity, a smiling, friendly, human face. This prima donna, a phenomenon of Albanian music, with a crystal sound, was and is

irreplaceable as her song is art, hymn, eternity-almost divine. Her strong lungs create for range of voice that allows for music that immerses you in a distant space and during the journey you get strength from the sound, accumulating the interior of the soul, feeling pleasure, opening paths of experience never felt before, and feeding your subconscious. In this journey, you don't need to be equipped with rules because Pagarusha herself was free, following the divine vocals and the sound. This mural, created by the Spanish artist Alba Fabre, is an example of the perpetuation of cultural figures in the square, an opening towards a mature cultural sphere in us as a nation in the first place. The surrounding regions of the Balkans should take tolerance of multicultural mural art as a good example of peace, raising the artistic, scientific, and educational level, as a positive cultural heritage. Made with two colors, it expresses the nostalgia of the time in which the singer reached her peak. Her traditional dress shows the culture and ethnography and the contribution she gave to Kosovo through song.

On this electric box, the artist Murati aims to transform the image of a piece of metal into a work of art by selecting Munch's "Scream". The electricity here is supplied by the government of Kosovo and distributed by this government.



Fig. 3. Mural of the iconic singer, Nexhmije Pagarusha, in Kosovo. The mural is based in Pristina.



Fig. 4 Ermira Murati paints Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' onto a pad-mounted transformer that faces the premises of the Kosovo Government. Photo: Antigone Isufi.

This was an ideological concept of hers. Basically, “The Scream” is an autobiographical work based on a vision of Munch while he was out with two of his friends. He recorded the inspiration behind this work in an entry in his diary on January 22, 1892. He writes how “suddenly the sky became blood red” and “the burning sky hung like blood and sword over the blue bay of black and above the city”. He describes himself as frozen and “trembling with anxiety” while feeling “a great endless scream coming from nature.” The oppressive swirling sky in bright colors and the curving landscape are embodiments of the vision Munch describes in the mural. The artist portrays a world that is chaotic. Through the main squares of Kosovo or through narrow alleys, various nooks and crannies, gloomy spaces, there are murals more about the personal, social and aesthetic life of the artists, freeing themselves from current politics or stories of war in the past. You can’t see any military figures from the last war, any graffiti with interracial intent, insults, in the spaces of Kosovo’s cities. Murati’s Munch-inspired figure, whose body mimics the curving disturbances of the landscape, is firmly anchored to the chaos that surrounds it. In stark contrast are the lines of the bridge that cut across the image

from right to left, a man-made creation untouched by the perturbations of the surrounding environment. Similarly, the two figures in the background, perhaps representations of Munch’s two friends in their verticality, appear equally unaffected by the scream the artist felt. The separation between these two parts of the image seems to overshadow the fact that, perhaps, this deformation in the landscape and the figures are not seen, but felt (not as something that is seen, but that is felt) as Munch also describes in his diary. This paves the way for the interpretation of the work as a representation of internal struggle, anxiety, and confusion. This shows that people are tired of politics, war, and history. They want urban spaces to flourish with joyful graffiti and murals in upbeat, cheerful light colors.

3. Murals in Serbia of political figures

In Serbia - Belgrade, the opposite is happening with murals. They are perpetuating murderous figures, negative examples, criminals convicted of war crimes identified by the whole world, and even instigators and perpetrators of the massacres in Kosovo. The figure of the butcher Ratko Mladic was immortalized in a mural in Belgrade. His face looked



Fig.5 Figure of Ratko Mladic in Belgrade and Cetnik Commander of World War II, Drazha Mihajlovic.

like an expression of ferocity and stupidity. His thin lips seem frozen. A military hat with a Serbian flag is placed on his head. He makes the military salute with his right hand. While we feed on artistic, educational, and cultural figures, Serbs sow the seeds of hatred and baptize criminals. However, many of the Serbian youth differ from political propaganda. For instance, on November 9, on the International Day against Fascism, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia tried to erase Mladic's mural, but the police stopped the action, on the grounds that there is a possibility of a conflict between his supporters and opponents. Mladic, former commander of the Bosnian Serb army, has been sentenced by the Court in The Hague to life imprisonment. He had been found guilty of genocide in Srebrenica, persecution, crimes against humanity, and other war crimes, committed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 1992 to 1995. The ruling coalition in Serbia, led by the Progressive Party of President Vuc, denies committing genocide in Srebrenica. Artists have only one language, the language of the soul, that language has always been global, it belongs to the ancient instinct. Artistic fertility ends with creative force. Artists should never look at things as they are, but more complete, simpler, and stron-

ger. The youth of the soul, the blossoming spring in eternity is their characteristic.

Next to Mihajlovi's portrait are written the lines of the Chetnik song "All are guards". The figure of Miši, meanwhile, is drawn on another building opposite. The flag of Serbia is also painted with it. Since unknown authors painted the mural of Mladic, four months ago, the citizens have painted over it several times, but the mural has always returned to its original state within a few hours.

Today, this mural of Putin is located in the green space in the center of Belgrade. Putin is seen with sunglasses covered in red. Even this work of political art shows the political influence of Serbian artists. But we must separate the people who cast color on Putin and the artists who incite conflict and hatred. The political artwork is one of several examples of pro-Russian graffiti appearing and then being manipulated in Belgrade amid the occupation of Ukraine. On the left side of Putin's mural, the artist first painted the word "brother". Someone then erased the first letter in blue ink, leaving the word "war". Recently, the unknown Russian supporter has repositioned the letter "B" and highlighted



Fig. 6 Mural of the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin in Belgrade, Serbia

the other letters in black spray paint. In the soul, you can see the fraternal support of the Serbs towards Russia, because they consider them to be a "big brother" figure. Art and war construct propaganda that is in the service of the war in question and the personal goals of the conquerors. The Serbian and Russian flags are painted behind Putin.

A day earlier, in Belgrade, the Russian occupation of Ukraine was supported by protests. Serbia was the only country in Europe that had such a protest, while the whole West has come out against Russia. Serbia, together with Belarus, are the only European countries that have not imposed sanctions on Russia due to the invasion of Ukraine. But the friendship between Serbia and Russia is increasingly "complicated". The slogan mentioned in many of these nationalist art pieces- "Brat" - or "Brother" - has been changed to "Rat", Serbian for "War".

Conclusion

What is noted and worth emphasizing is that art is universal and its language is used as a means of propaganda, be it spiritual, historical or war-like. In Kosovo, artists hate politics and do not deal with it at all. While in Serbia, artists incite conflict between the two nations that were at war in 1998-99. Kosovo was freed from this and has seen no figure of the last war, no hero has presented it on the walls of the cities. Contrarily, Serbia publishes brotherhood with Russia. As a result, we conclude that the people, after throwing color, do not want to live with the thought of hatred and incitement to war. In Serbia, the people are separated from art, while in Kosovo, the people are engrossed in art.

References:

H. Muharremi: Metamorphosis of figurative language, The Kosova Academy of Sciences and Arts.M. Protiq, oblik i vreme (Form and time), Beograd 2002.

<https://d4d-ks.org/editorial/arti-dhe-politika/>

<https://www.dylberizm.com/2022/08/07/qm/>

<https://www.radiokosovaelire.com/ilir-muharremi-punimi-i-ibrahim-kodres-ne-qender-teprishtines/>

https://www.mkrs-ks.org/?page=1,6,2707#.Y_iDYnbMLIU

<http://www.zemrashqiptare.net/nees/36129/ilir-muharremi-arti-dhe-politika.html>

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/beograd-grafti-ukrajina/31844638.html> <https://www.koha.net/bote/314198/murali-i-vellait-putin-shfaqet-ne-beograd/>

<https://streetartbelgrade.com/>

<https://www.telegraf.rs/pop-i-kultura/art/3277727-ulicina-umetnost-murali-beograd> <http://serbianunderground.com/top-10-najbolji-grafti-u-beogradu/> <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/335870084703103020/>

<https://mreza.rs/tv-mreza/grafti-i-murali-u-beogradu-veliki-muzej-pod-vedrim-nebom/> <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-56834353>

<https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/3467018-pojavio-se-mural-sa-likom-vladimira-putinana-vracaru-pored-lika-predsednika-rusije-ispisana-jedna-rec> <https://srpskainfo.com/nastavlja-se-rat-grafitima-poslije-mladica-osvanuo-mural-putina-kojije-ubrzo-unisten-drustvene-mreze-se-usijale-foto/>

<https://katera.news/lat/putinov-mural-u-beogradu-na-meti-vandala> <https://n1info.hr/regija/isaran-mural-s-likom-vladimira-putina-u-beogradu/> <https://www.sd.rs/tags/grafti?page=2>