

Street Art & Graffiti in Belgrade: Ecological Potentials?

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Abstract

Since the emergence of the global contemporary graffiti and street art, urban spaces have become filled with a variety of techniques and art pieces, whether as a beautification method, commemorative and community art, or even activism. Ecology has also been a small part of this, with growing concern over our environment's health (as well as our own), disappearing living species and habitats, and trying to imagine a better, less destructive humankind (see: Arrieta, 2014).

But, how can this art - based mostly on aerosol spray cans and thus not very eco-friendly - in urban spaces contribute to ecological awareness? Do nature, animal and plant motifs pave a way towards understanding the environment, or simply serve as aesthetic statements? This paper will examine these questions with the example of Belgrade, Serbia, and several local (but also global) practices. This text is based on ongoing research as part of Street Art Walks Belgrade project (STAW BLGRD) and interviews with a group of artists.

Keywords: street art, graffiti, ecology, environmental art, belgrade

1. Introduction: Environmental art

Art has always been connected to the natural world - with its origins using natural materials and representing the living world. But somewhere in the 1960s in the USA and the UK, a new set of practices emerged, redefining environmental art, and moving away from traditional art history and representation. Land or Earth Art took artists and art lovers to nature itself, bringing it in its crude form into gallery spaces, collaborating with nature and challenging the very nature of an artwork. This happened in conjunction with post-WWII avantgarde and conceptual practices. Unlike environmental art, a more recent trend called ecological art, or eco art, is less concerned about aesthetics and the use of natural materials, but rather mixing art, science and technology, proposing activism and practical bio-social solutions for our environment. Artist researcher mirko nikolić¹, in his PhD about ecological aesthetics, sees this art approach as going beyond human selfishness, towards posthumanism, and incorporating matters such as climate and social justice (see: nikolić, 2016).

Of course, sometimes clear distinctions are hard to make, but for the sake of explaining the basic principles, a good example between the terms and practices could be seen in the two illustrations below. The first one, The crack of something (Figure 2), uses natural material - wood - which is processed and presented as a temporary installation, as part of an art residency program Ars Kozara set in the National park on Kozara mountain. Its physical longevity depends on the natural and human factors, under constant state of decay, and its reading lies in poetic reference to cracks in the source material. In a critique of all the artworks produced during the residency, Stojsavljević and Anćufejev state that the artists are passivizing the role of nature, by using it just as a raw material and creating a new, artistic nature, where "the artwork is more the expression of the artist" than nature itself (Stojsavljević and Anćufejev, 2013).

¹ - Original capitalization.



Figure 1. Plant a tree – Send a message. Artez. Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©LSD Magazine.

This one belongs more in the environmental art category, while a still of the video from *we - copper & copper - us: mineralizacija* project offers a more complex involvement (Figure 3). There, the source material goes between actual human involvement with nature - extraction of copper by the metal industry in Bor, the scientific and other processes that accompany it, presented as multimedia, still with an

artistic or poetic reading behind it. As an example of eco art, it tackles many ongoing theoretical discussions, such as the notion of anti-extractivism (nikolić, 2016: 241). Although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, I will use environmental art (Martinique, 2016; Tunnacliffe, 2016: 17) because it covers a wide range of practices and is more applicable to the subject in question.



Figure 2. Pucanje nečega (The crack of something). Ars Kozara: art in nature laboratory #7, 2014. Goran Čupić. Mountain Kozara, Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photograph ©Ars Kozara.

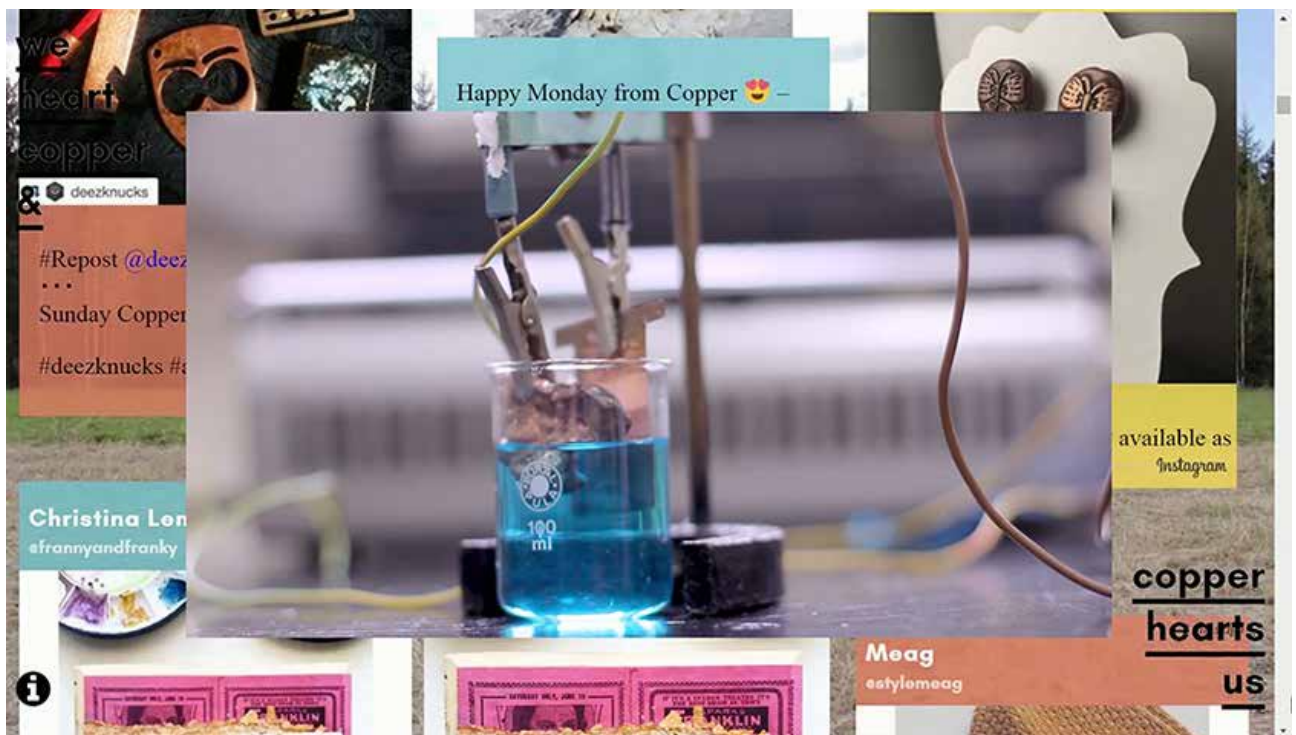


Figure 3. Blue stone synthesis experiment with Dr. Aleksandra Mitovski. Performance documentation, we - copper & copper - us: mineralizacija. mirko nikolić. Bor, Serbia, 2016. Photograph ©Duško Jelen.



Figure 4. Green works. Paul Curtis, a.k.a. Moose. San Francisco, 2009. Photograph ©Wide Walls, 2014.

Trying to pin down strict definitions of both graffiti and street art might turn out to be too complex, having in mind numerous and fluctuating readings. Relying on the research by Ljiljana Radošević, who has been following street art and graffiti in Belgrade and Serbia in the last 20 years, both street art and graffiti belong to public art (or art in public space, urban art), fluctuating between a subculture and fine art movement, lifestyle and art practices (Radošević, 2012). However, there are many similarities between them - in her research which tackles terminological issues she states: "It goes without saying that graffiti and street art are closely connected and intertwined: sometimes they share the same walls, the same artists and the same techniques, but most of the time they produce a different visual material" (Radošević, 2012). While the graffiti movement has roots in 1970s US subculture, street art emerged later, mixing the graffiti heritage with visual arts (also see: Norvaišaitė, 2014: 9-11). For this paper, I will focus on artworks made on walls - murals, made by artists predominantly working in the field of graffiti and street art in Serbia.

In both street art and graffiti (SAG), there is a plethora of nature and animal motifs, while a breakthrough in more ecologically aware techniques appeared in the mid 2000s. A set of practices labelled as reverse graffiti offered the technique of removing layers of dirt to create messages and images. It is also known as clean tagging, dust tagging, grime writing, clean graffiti, green graffiti or clean advertising. Because of this, it has been accepted in green marketing (Figure 4). Another technique, moss graffiti combines stencils and moss paste to leave less invasive marks in public areas. Some other artists started using discarded materials in the form of recycled art, such as Bordalo II (Figure 5). These techniques remain rare in the graffiti and street art world, and are predominantly tied to themes such as urban pollution, exploring biodegradable materials, and making the urban environment more green (Bambić, 2014b; Norvaišaitė, 2016).

This trend does pose a few questions and challenges for more traditional styles, techniques and forms. On the one hand, graffiti and most street art is based on aerosol paint

and the use of industrial spray cans. New eco practices are far removed from this approach, distancing themselves from the non-eco-friendly aspects of spray cans, such as waste, presence of heavy metals, and poisonous chemicals. However, both share great visibility in public space, potent direct communication, and are ephemeral at the core.

2. Case Study: Belgrade

If not originally rooted in these new environmental practices, is it still possible to have graffiti and street art that raises awareness of ecology? I would argue that it is possible, if we see graffiti and street art as part of the urban ecosystem. Metaphorically, this often non-permitted artform grows like purslane from cracks in concrete, on walls and other surfaces, covering spaces from small corners to whole facades. It both pollutes the visual field like weeds and serves as a beautification method. It can serve a similar need like growing a plant or keeping a pet, where we nurture a connection with nature around or far removed from us.

Belgrade is the birthplace of graffiti and street art in Serbia, with roots in the mid 1980s, expanding only in mid 1990s during the student protests against the Milošević regime. From the original letters of graffiti subculture, characters of street art, and traditional mural painting, this city also offers environmental motifs taken from flora and fauna. It goes without saying that just by simply depicting a natural motif, a work does not automatically have ecological messages. However, by diving deeper into the artists' oeuvre, one can note ecological potentials, apart from manifest eco murals, which I aim to support. In several examples, I would also pay attention to how artist intention relates to interpretation of the work, and what could be done to make this eco reading potentially more clear.

For the purpose of this text, several active street artists were contacted based on the presence of natural motifs in their work and nine out of twenty responded to a survey via Instagram between autumn 2019 and spring 2020. All are actively producing SAG, whether coming from (visual) arts, the very subculture of graffiti or other backgrounds: Jana, wrnkl, Lunar, Piros, Junk, ZEZ lunatic, Artez, Quam and Brva. Most have been active for the last



Figure 5. The Swift/*Apus Apus*. Bordallo II. Lodz, 2015. Photograph ©I Support Street Art, 2015.

decade, or longer, and all but one operate from Belgrade. This does not at all cover all the street art and graffiti artists operating in Belgrade, or Serbia, with a potential ecological reading.

The survey was designed to discover more about the reasons and meanings behind the animal and plant motifs present in their works, as well as messages artists wanted to communicate in the streets. The focus on motivation, motifs and messages, as well ecological potentials, is echoing Veronika Norvaišaitė's approach in her study *Environmental Communication in Street Art: Motivations & Messages of Reverse Graffiti Creators*, where she interviewed artists and green companies utilizing reversed graffiti around the world. In grounding a certain ecological practice, it is necessary to understand the messages communicated behind certain motifs (Norvaišaitė, 2016: 62). Motifs are also important because, according to nikolić, environmental art imports nature into culture, e.g. by depicting nature and/or using it as raw material (nikolić, 2016: 46-52).² In this process, nature is considered as something taken from the outside, while more radical eco-orientated art sees nature as part of a "cohabitation of agencies, human and other-than-human" (nikolić, 2016: 51). Following their leads, chapters *The Elm-Chanted Forest* and *Urban Jungle* will mostly tackle the use of nature's symbology, as subject-matter, through a variety of animal and plant motifs, while *Plant a tree, send a message: Ecology, responsibility and activism* will pay more attention to critical practices with certain ecological techniques as well.

Additionally, when asked about ecological readings of their work, most of the artists dismissed the label, stating that they are more interested in urban than natural surroundings, social relations, and an individual's place in society. Apart from using animals as alter egos, metaphorical motifs and formal inspiration, several of them acknowledged the communication potential of SAG and noted several artworks that have ecological messages. Regarding motivation, reasons for including natural motifs differ among: inspiration for formal and symbolic explorations (symbols widely popular and understandable), love towards the natural world, animals as transmitters of

2 - In the street art and graffiti world, using natural materials is still rare and an emerging practice, that's why this article focuses mostly on depicted motifs.

emotions and messages, metaphorical greening, search for spirituality, and alter egos.

3. The Elm-Chanted Forest: Nature as alter ego

Creating and invoking a connection between urban and natural spaces, at least through images, artists are visually challenging the often gray and brown city, dilapidated and discarded areas. Among the most popular motifs are animals which are culturally infused with symbolism, according to Claude Levi Strauss, because they are "good to think with." On the streets of Belgrade in the past years, most species in SAG are local animals (domesticated and wild), with a few examples of exotic and pop culture ones. There is also a great number of hybrid beings, standing somewhere between monsters and fantasy creatures.

Artists such as Lunar and Brva emphasize that animals can transmit emotions and universal values with more sincerity than humans (or human motifs). According to Lunar, who is based in Zagreb and has been making art since the late 1980s: "Evolutionally, they were there before humans and aren't capable of causing such damage (to the environment) as humans have, they simply exist" (Interview with Lunar, 2019). ZEZ lunatic said that "nature is an inevitable motif, after all, we're all nature" (Interview with ZEZ lunatic, 2019). By relying on commonplace and personal symbolic readings, the artist gives animals meanings of happiness and tenderness (rabbit), wisdom (owl), and strength (bull).³ This reading is quite personal and often relying on commonplace assumptions and present cultural symbols.

Several artists create distinct characters that can be interpreted as alter egos. They stand as signs, visual signatures, that we can recognize in addition to their overall style. Given the often anonymity of the creators, these animals the authors identify with could be seen as their stand-ins in public space, fulfilling the function of a tag. Rage (also known as Resto) uses a characteristic animal alter ego that looks like a fox, as well as a dog called Jackie (Džeki / Љеки.; Figure 8); Lunar is recognizable by his often positive, good-hearted cats (or tomcat, Catso; Figure 6), wrnkl with his pug stencils (Figures 18 and 26), and Brva with French bulldogs (Figure 7).

3 - Other artists depict a variety of animals, both local and global, such as Junk, Weedzor, Lemon One, Oniro (IT), and Ami imaginaire (FR), the latter two leaving a few pieces behind upon visiting Serbia.



Figure 6. United Colors of Belgrade, Festival Rekonstrukcija 2018. Lunar & Flying Förtress. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©Street Art Walks Belgrade / STAW BLGRD.



Figure 7. Festival Rekonstrukcija 2019. Brva, Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©Festival Rekonstrukcija.

Piros has a distinct invented animal, which is a hybrid with a rooster's head and wasp's body, called Džamutka (Figure 9). He emphasizes that painting Džamutka is an "expression of my own freedom statement. She has a noble mission, to inspire and motivate on her path!" (Interview with Piros, 2019). According to Radošević:

...for its author it represents all the best in this world – extreme dedication and ability to fly. And if pushed to the limits it can sting. The name was derived from the Roma dialect in which it has a meaning of curse word but it can also mean something frightful and unseen. Therefore Džamutka can be everything and nothing and exactly this contradiction can infuse all sorts of traits in her" (Radošević, 2020).

Piros' hybrid is an invented character with great personal symbolism, and it is rather common to see imaginary creatures and hybrids.⁴ As in the case of Džamutka, cultural background and local history often influences the

4 - Another Belgrade-based artist, Velvet, has a mermaid/octopus character, referencing Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, which could stand as her alter ego or at least trademark. Weedzor usually depicts colorful animal faces, while for Runaway Festival 2019 the artist made a unicorn in a project sponsored by Sprite. Artists such as Snout, Endo, and Alek Leaf also often use monster-like or hybrid characters.

artwork, as could be seen with few artists from abroad who made their mark with a fusion of certain "tribal" elements, referencing native imagery from Latin America, such as Farid Rueda (MX, in Belgrade) and Jumu (PE, in Čačak). Rueda in his two murals so far made as part of the Runaway Festival painted a deer (Figure 10) and an eagle (the latter in collaboration with TKV), common forest animals in Serbia, incorporating them in his complex and rich in color style blending Mexican popular culture and evoking pre-Conquest Mexican societies.

Birds are a common motif - Brva made one of his early murals of an owl, while TKV and Jana often depict swallows (Figure 11). Jana analyses the bird motif as representing a personal and social need to (not)belong to a group identity:

Birds were a handy metaphor - if you pull out a bird (from the swarm) she's a freedom symbol, and when you push her in the swarm she becomes part of a multitude of sameness, something that doesn't have an identity (of its own) (Kalaba, 2019).

As we can see in this example, the reading fluctuates depending on the context. Similar is with another example. Rats are expected companions during the night when most SAG artists do their magic, and are often referenced on the walls of Belgrade. An undisclosed artist known simply as



Figure 8. Џеки. Rage. Belgrade, Serbia, 201?. Photograph ©Street Art Walks Belgrade / STAW BLGRD.



Figure 9. Džamutka. Piros. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©Piros.



Figure 10. Runaway Festival & Donji Dorćol. Farid Rueda. Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©Street Art Walks Belgrade / STAW BLGRD.



Figure 11. Jana. Belgrade, Serbia, 2017. Photograph ©Jana Danilović.

Ratz (or Rats) made a series of human-sized rat characters engaging in everyday activities and street scenes in 2013, reimagining the city dwellers as living in a hood (Figure 12). TKV - Kraljica Vila (The Fairy Queen) - also made a rat series between 2018 and 2019 (Figure 13), where she accepts them as one of street art & graffiti symbols. And this should be no surprise given the popular imagery of artists such as Banksy (UK) and before him Blek le rat (FR), the latter leaving his traces in the yard of the Cultural Center Magacin (Belgrade) in 2009. Blek le rat famously said that the rat is “the only free animal in the city” and their image reminds city people of often invisible and suppressed urban elements (I Support Street Art, 2017).

Insects are also a notable theme. Quam dedicated most of his recent art to natural motifs, using them to explore formal qualities. Murals of monarch butterfly’s hatching (made for DUK Festival 2019; Figure 34), scarab and longhorn beetle (Figure 14), or drawings of crickets, cicadas, moths and the

rest stand as poetic interpretations of the natural world, often with a symbolism of rebirth and transformation (series *Metamorphosis*), if not just fascination. However, Quam prefers when the message is subtle and not imposing: “I like the form of living creatures, they are rewarding to draw because they have a lot of information and could be used in a variety of contexts” (Interview with Quam, 2020).

Relying on the fantastic and metaphorical, several artists have been depicting human-plant hybrids. Artez has a series of humans who in place of heads and torsos have plants, or humans with bird houses as heads, inviting the birds in (Figure 15). This could be read as an attempt to acknowledge the (need for) nature inside of us (Interview with Artez, 2020). In a wider field of urban art, plants are also used as an ally, often tackling issues such as activism, community and urban regeneration (see: Pedersen, 2018).



Figure 12. Rats. Belgrade, Serbia, 2013. Photograph ©Street Art Walks Belgrade / STAW BLGRD.



Figure 13. TKV. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©Street Art Walks Belgrade / STAW BLGRD.

Many artists stated that by depicting natural motifs they are symbolically and visually participating in a project of making Belgrade greener. Junk, as well as Piros and Artez, emphasizes that his murals contribute to the effect of greenification of the city. In his words:

There is not a specific message, more an effect, it's interesting for me to take natural elements and invented characters and put them in an urban space and to have that colorfulness - which I often employ in my work - popping out from the concrete grayness (Interview with Junk, 2019).

Spring Vibes (Figure 16) and Mother Nature murals, as well as his contribution to the Rekonstrukcija Festival 2018 bear witness to this statement. Another artist, Marko Ćulum, following this thread, states that creating a mural is just a part of activities one could do to make the environment look better, and that he as an artist can provide "a game for the eye, an impulse" to make one's day better in the city's concrete grayness (Banić, 2020).

Another well present scene is forest and farm, as a personal project or a setting for collaborations. Artists such as Junk and Snout depict a variety of plants, animals and often symbols grouped together. But the most striking ones might be the large-scale graffiti jams, such as Meeting of Styles 2010 and Runaway Festival 2018 (Figure 17). The collaborative large-scale mural made for the latter offers a possible interpretation of the famous Animal Farm novel by George Orwell, where Brva contributed a pack of dogs and sheep. Animals serve as symbols of e.g. freedom, independence, struggle, and love, and that through street art the artist wants to communicate those messages. Brva claims that this aspect of his work can be seen as ecological because "...it draws attention to specific types of animals which require (that) attention" (Interview with Brva, 2020). While attention is good, as a prerequisite for further ecological actions, it raises the question - what next? Fitting well with the environmental art definition, these examples are trying to address ecological questions from within the art world, via aesthetics. But how to create stronger, more purposeful messages and links with the ecosystem? This will be further explored in the next two chapters.



Figure 14. Quam. Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©Igor Svetel / Walls of Belgrade.



Figure 15. Artez. Belgrade, Serbia, 2017. Photograph ©Artez.



Figure 16. Spring vibes pt. 2. Junk. Belgrade, Serbia, 2016. Photograph ©Junk.



Figure 17. Runaway Festival 2018. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©Vatovec.

4. Urban Jungle: Commenting on the environment

While most of the previous examples were not made specifically to foster a direct (or sometimes conscious) ecological message, and most artists usually avoid putting “eco” in front of their works, nevertheless there are murals with general ecological messages. Ecology, usually understood as a human’s relation to the natural world, can be understood as using natural motifs to comment on our wider environment. In her research about how environmentally engaged urban street art provokes interactions between various urbanites with the environment, Claire Malaika Tunnacliffe notes:

The environment does not stand-alone against political, social or economic issues; our daily reality is woven out of these entanglements. Environmentally engaged urban street art reflects this by critiquing everyday life through the social interstices it creates, and revealing new environmental understandings, raising an awareness of surroundings (Tunnacliffe, 2016: 18).



Figure 18. wrnkl. Belgrade, Serbia, 2014. Photograph ©Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani.

Festival Rekonstrukcija in Belgrade (Figures 7 and 21) recognized this potential for street art to address and collaborate with the communities in and via public space, paving the road to a more general citizen activism:

Art interventions set in the context of everyday people’s lives, in neighborhoods, can influence a new reading of the city (parts) in a multifaceted way, creating new urban contexts and connecting people. By positioning the art in public space, it [public space, author’s note] stops being faceless and closed for communication, rather, on the contrary, calls for a dialogue - between the city and individuals, between the inhabitants themselves, but also by provoking the creation of other artworks, which juxtaposed make new relations (Marković, 2020: 5).

While collaboration with communities, if not the ecologists themselves, in this sphere remains scarce, artists do see the power in public art, which is a valuable resource for more active community engagement. In chapter 3, I mentioned a few uses of alter egos - some other artists use them as commentators on society (and the urban environment), that I like to label street philosophers. From the past years, some of the most prominent ones on the streets of Belgrade have been wrnkl, Vudemn (an actual philosopher) and Orbot. wrnkl - also known as inspektor Joda zgužvani (inspector Yoda the wrinkled) has taken an image of one of his pugs as the literal face for his messages. Made as stencils, with added speech balloons, the pugs comment, often with almost untranslatable word plays, on gender relations, subvert common sayings, and generally play with language loaded with an activist mindset (Marčetić, 2014). A few examples include: “Izvini, nisi moj (stereo)tip” (Sorry, you ain’t my (stereo)type), “Duga je ulica” (The street is long/ rainbow), “Ne tuci (p)se” (Don’t beat dogs/yourself) and “Strah rađa nasilje” (Fear gives birth to violence; Figure 18). On a more general level, the artist sees that animals have the spiritual potential to reconnect us to nature, reminding us of an alienated world that has therefore become even magical, and aims to present animals as equal to, if not above, humans (Interview with wrnkl, 2019).

Artists such as ZEZ lunatic created a world full of anthropomorphic beasts and animals, raging on and from the walls, in a surreal, comic book-like setting. He mentioned in the interview that his goal is to both express emotions and offer a critique of contemporary society, mainly capitalism, consumerism and materialism, such as in the mural More food for people (Figure 19), targeting fast



Figure 19. More food for people. ZEZ lunatic. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©ZEZ lunatic.

food chains such as KFC and McDonalds (Interview with ZEZ lunatic, 2019). The artist finds it important to raise the consciousness of the onlookers: "For me, it's enough just to create a reaction, whatever it might be. Lethargy is worse than any bad reaction" (Milošević, 2018).

Nevercrew from Switzerland made their *Imitation of life no. 9* depicting a paint machine going over an old blue (actually sperm) whale, made for Mikser festival 2014 (Figure 20).

Often using endangered species, such as whales and polar bears in their poetic interpretations of our environmental challenges, Nevercrew said that: "It's about transformation, evolution, which are all ideas very current in this area (Savamala)" (Bambić, 2014a). We could also assume the city itself represented as the sea mammal, old but still standing, putting up with another renovation by the machines, while remaining the same at its core.



Figure 20. Imitation of life no. 9. Nevercrew. Belgrade, Serbia, 2014. Photograph ©Ana Bambić Kostov / Widewalls.

Poetic and symbolic approach is also utilized by Jana who covered many walls with jungle-like plants and often presents human hearts intertwined with swallows, waves, plants, and other elements that have personal and symbolic meanings. These are made as large-scale murals and more intimate paste ups, where Jana literally plants a seed in us: a heart made for Rekonstrukcija Festival 2018 has a growing branch poking out of it (Figure 21). Another, The Heart of the Mountain at Divčibare mountain was made for the Mountain Music Festival in 2018,⁵ making a rare intervention into the natural surrounding itself (Figure 22). By utilizing visual symbols, she constructs a metaphor somewhere between notions of tamedness/civilization/smoothness and wildness (in a positive light), linking our inner wilderness with the one surrounding us (Interview

with Jana, 2019). Here, the connection is direct, by using widely recognized (heart, plants) symbols, and setting the hearts in certain context (abandoned building, mountain), the artist is able to communicate her message with less ambiguity.

Artez usually combines plants with humans and their intimate surroundings, offering a connection with nature, but also ecological messages. Works such as Plant a tree, send a message (Figure 1); Unexpected journey through the day 3: Help her grow; Reading makes you grow (Figure 23) and many others offer both a message of greening the city and personal, doable engagements that everyone can do in our daily lives. In general, when asked about ecological aspects of his work, the artist aims to be more aware while working, not leaving trash behind him, recycling materials and tools, and so on. "What I like most is spending time in

5 - <http://mmf.rs/2019/05/>



Figure 21. Festival Rekonstrukcija 2018. Jana. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©Street Smart Belgrade.



Figure 22. Srce planine (The hearth of the mountain). Jana. Divčibare, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©Mountain Music Fest.



Figure 23. Reading makes you grow, Campo en Blanco project. Artez. Armstrong, Argentina, 2016. Photograph ©Firma creative.

nature, that's why I'm trying to bring a bit of greenery to the space I'm working in by using floral motifs" (Interview with Artez, 2020). Junk says similarly: "My works in a way point to the fact that we need more green areas in the city, and by using colors and motifs from nature I'm creating an image about how important it is for a city to have its little green oases" (Interview with Junk, 2019).

Lunar with his cats (Catso) has an underlying belief to promote universal messages of a good and constructive world, as shown in his murals Daily care for nature, Protectors (Figure 24) and Savage Love. In the survey, Lunar noted grimly that many ecological solutions, such as recycling, have been globally used to "smudge our eyes" instead of contributing to real social change. He is disappointed with human ignorance of ecology, and "... aware of my own powerlessness, but just the same I don't

plan only to sit down and look at the downfall that we're presented with by the hordes of parasites [corrupted politicians]" (Interview with Lunar, 2019).

Duo Studio Kriška made a fictitious and allegorical Endangered Savamala's Ghost Panda in Belgrade (Figure 25), as part of their wider project Ghost people of Savamala, with an interesting social twist: "...he represents all the repressed inhabitants of Savamala, the ones without a voice, that are not seen or are pushed aside, but are still a part of the community" (Kriška studio, 2013; also: Start Street Art Belgrade, 2014a). This and most of previous works rely on symbolic and often poetic and subtle reading of our environment, reflecting on the society and communicating a personal need for closer links with the natural world. A way towards activism and more bold ecological involvement could be made by incorporating ecological findings and less



Figure 24. Protector. Lunar. Zagreb, Croatia, 2019. Photograph ©Lunar.

ambiguous messages.

5. It's our responsibility...: Ecology and activism

In discussing various practices of reverse graffiti, Veronika Norvaišaitė notes that art in the streets has social potentials and in her research underlines that "...creators of reverse graffiti are much more driven by the possibility to beautify neglected places and improve the social atmosphere there than by a desire to bring to attention the issue of pollution" (78). In other words, they seem equally interested in influencing the social and the physical environment. In the case of Belgrade, the social aspect - beautification and pro-ecological messages - seem to be predominant, still with a few notable eco technical interventions lining towards eco graffiti and eco art.

Many artists are focused on humans and their relation to the city environment and nature. wrnkl's philosophical messages, as previously mentioned, target homo- and trans- phobias, violence towards people and animals (as in *Ne tuci (p)se - Don't beat dogs/yourself*, Figure 26), and aim to influence people's perceptions in a playful and



Figure 25. Endangered Savamala's Ghost Panda. Studio Kriška. Belgrade, Serbia, 2013. Photograph ©selenborcbakan.

activist way. Another example is a green mountain goat pushing a domino-like structure in Piroš' mural made as part of *Be pArt Budva Festival* in 2018 (Figure 27). For this mural the artist stated in his portfolio: "The main purpose of this project is to spread [e.g. talk about, author's note] the negative attitude of young people towards improper construction, unplanned urbanism and the irresponsible behaviour of humanity towards nature and its resources" (Piroš, 2020: 27).

In Pop Lukina street no. 6 in Belgrade, we have a mini case study which shows two different voices in the eco story, both which gain their strength from knowing and incorporating the local context in the artwork itself. The first one was made as part of *Belef 09 festival*, with BLU's piece *The tree eater*. BLU (IT), still keeping an anonymous identity, creates large-scale often site-specific murals on a global scale, infused with critical and activist commentary of social relations, values and current politics. The Belgrade one presents a business person with buildings instead of teeth devouring a green tree (Figure 28). "The message is clear - nature loses the battle with urban expansion and enormous developmental projects which are destroying it



Figure 26. Ne tuci (p)se. wrnkl. Srebrno jezero, Serbia, 2014. Photograph ©wrnkl.



Figure 27. Be pArt Budva festival. Budva, Montenegro, 2016. Photograph ©Fondacija Budva.

day by day” (Start Street Art Belgrade, 2014b). The mural is more current than ever given that the city government has initiated many reconstruction projects in the past years that removed trees and previously green spaces by filling them with concrete and insisting on the “concretization” of public space (Tešić, 2019). This is all happening in a period when there is a rising concern about the air quality, which has dramatically worsened during the 2019/2020 winter period.

The newer mural is Zeleni grad - nova energija (The green city - new energy) initiated by NIS (Naftna industrija Srbije - Oil company of Serbia), which had a petrol pump just underneath BLU's piece (Figure 29). Designed by Sara Antov and Dragan Vuković, and executed by the Paint Kartel graffiti crew, the mural imagines the interconnected city like a leaf with its veins. It serves a marketing purpose (Danas, 2018), signaling an ecological dedication of the company and a vision of a green future (if already not the

present), which features more green areas followed by art.

Two years afterwards, the muralization has not been continued and the ecological potential of many public spaces is unrealized, if not already erased with concrete. “The big companies nowadays are, ironically, the ones to be the loudest in carrying on campaigns for protection of the natural environment and investing big money in recycling which became a profitable business as well” (Start Street Art Belgrade, 2014b). The tree eater and The green city showcase two approaches, coming from a personal activism and urban redevelopment. While the former became a reality, in its 11th year of existence, the latter stands as a fragile promise.

Looking back at motifs, while many animals seem to be accepted as a global imagery, ready to be used anywhere, some of them are specifically linked to local and endangered



Figure 28. The tree eater. BLU. Belgrade, Serbia, 2009. Photograph ©Start Street Art Belgrade.



Figure 29. Zeleni grad - nova energija. Sara Antov and Dragan Vuković. Belgrade, Serbia, 2018. Photograph ©NIS.



Figure 30. Odgovornost je naša za orla krstaša. Piros. Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©Igor Svetel / Walls of Belgrade.



Figure 31. Crna žuna ne može bez šuma. Mišo Joskić. Podgorica, Montenegro, 2018. Photograph ©Mišo Joskić.

species. Another “urban-ecological” artwork by Piros represents the eastern imperial eagle (orao krstaš) that was unveiled in the lower Dorćol area, tied to a campaign by LAV beer and the Bird Protection and Study Society of Serbia (BPSSS), supported by the Association of Lower Dorćol (Figure 30). The aim of the campaign was to protect endangered birds and their habitat and rebuild it at Fruška Gora mountain. According to the mural initiators, at the time (2019), although the eagle is the national symbol, only one nesting pair was found in the country and BPSSS worked hard to provide them all the necessary resources to reproduce (B92, 2019; Piros, 2020: 41). In an example from neighboring Montenegro, Mišo Joskić depicted a deforestation scene warning the public about the habitat loss of black woodpeckers, initiated by the Center for Protection and Research of Birds (CZIP) (Đurović, 2018; Figure 31). Apart from being related to larger call-for-action projects, these works provide more context and involvement, by bringing attention to animals which require it, to paraphrase Brva’s words.

As far as my knowledge goes, there have not been any continuous and actual attempts to use reverse graffiti or

similar techniques in Belgrade.⁶ A Youtube video shows Moose (UK), one of the founders of reverse graffiti or clean tagging, who worked on a hallway in Belgrade in 2011 with a few fine arts students.⁷ Recently, in 2019, Belgrade artist Ivan Kocić made a mural Griffon Vulture (beloglavi sup) using recycled materials, an extension of his Recycling of Play assemblage project, which could be an interesting way forward, mixing mural and installation art (Figure 32).⁸ Together with Piros’ eagle mural, it tackles a sensitive bird species, which was luckily saved from near-extinction. Additionally, it is also part of a wider environmental project, supported by the EU, and was made in collaboration with school kids (Evropa.rs, 2019).

Recently, in autumn 2020, a mural was made as part of Converse City Forests project, the very first one in

6 - wrnkl mentioned an intention to do moss graffiti, but hasn't done so yet (Interview with wrnkl, 2019).

7 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0nHYRFm5JA>

8 - <https://www.instagram.com/p/BztR9yAlsxG/> A prominent international example of eco alternative street art techniques could be found in the works of Bordalo II (Figure 5).

Serbia which uses colors⁹ that actively clean the air from pollutants (Figure 33). This technology is based on the photocatalytic process naturally present in the Earth's atmosphere (Banić, 2020). Artists Artez and Wuper created a scene called Celebrating our roots inspired by tradition and ecology, where one of the characters depicted has a bouquet of flowers instead of their head (Arsić, 2020). In a podcast about ecological street art, Wuper mentioned that the ecological colors gave "mural a good story behind it" and how the artist hopes the technique would come to life, especially in cities like Belgrade (Banić, 2020). In the current absence of other practices, technically this mural is the closest Belgrade came to eco-art in the streets, by incorporating materials which actively contribute to the environment's wellbeing. Here we could have an example of what nikolić calls "a cohabitation of agencies, human and other-than-human" (nikolić, 2016: 51), where the active colors and their interaction with polluted air are integral part - conceptually and physically - of the artwork.

9 - <http://www.knoxoutpaints.com/about.do?id=20800>

6. Conclusions

Given the pieces present in Belgrade streets and the specific artworks by the artists who responded to the survey, one can see that most ecological actions come from personal, aesthetic programs, with a few examples of direct activism. While few would categorize their initiatives as ecological, given the public aspect of their work and motivations to make art, it is evident that street art and graffiti have great potential in talking about our environment. Given the rapid industrialization and increasing migrations to big cities worldwide, Tunnacliffe states that street art does have potentials to "rewrite" the urban environment:

It is important to remember that nature and society do not exist in isolation from one another. Everyday life in the urban setting is made up of social and natural entanglements. To ignore their relation to one another is to ignore the very fabric of today's urban society, maintaining the invisible barriers between the two (Tunnacliffe, 2016: 7).



Figure 32. Beloglavi sup (Griffon Vulture). Ivan Kocić. Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©A. Malko / Ras Srbija.



Figure 33. Celebrating our roots. Artez & Wuper. Belgrade, Serbia, 2020. Photograph ©Igor Svetel / Walls of Belgrade.

This statement provides ground to understand one's work in the streets as potentially artistic. Therefore, it is my goal to find a way of approaching street art and graffiti with ecological potentials. However, it would not be beneficial to force ecological readings onto the artists' work, as to quote Quam, "themes of preserving the natural environment are almost never present in my work. I think I'd change profession if I wanted to deal with those topics. I use elements from urban and natural surroundings in my works to often tell a personal story or because they are interesting as drawing templates" (Interview with Quam, 2020). On the other hand, Brva says "the connection (between SAG and ecology) is of course possible only if ecology is honored in all aspects of a mural, from creation to the message itself" (Interview with Brva, 2020). I feel that if the work itself is not closely related to an artist's oeuvre, it can lose much of its creativity and power; likewise, if it's solely a beautification project, it has a bleak ecological potential.

Most artists agreed that a way forward towards eco art would be to use more eco-friendly colors (as with the newest example by Artez and Wuper), recycling (Kocić) and a purposeful ecological activism (Piros's eagle). Certainly, if remaining within traditional, not biodegradable techniques or less polluting colors (such as acrylics), SAG could still rely on an aesthetic greenification of the gray city walls, focusing

primarily on communication of ecological messages, which many artists see as a great potential. To achieve it, more work is needed on researching the current ecological challenges, local context and ways how to address the public. Support and momentum gained from city projects that aim to tackle ecological issues has its benefits, and could be used creatively by the artists, however avoiding traps of greenwashing and relying solely on projects to do continuous eco work.

On the other side, scientists and researchers according to Curtis, Reid, and Ballard, have mostly overlooked the potential role of the arts in disseminating scientific findings, although the arts have a history of social activism. According to them:

The arts can synthesize and convey complex scientific information, promote new ways of looking at issues, touch people's emotions, and create a celebratory atmosphere, as was evident in this case study. In like manner, the visual and performing arts should be harnessed to help extend the increasingly unpalatable and urgent messages of global climate change science to a lay audience worldwide (Curtis, Reid, and Ballard, 2012).



Figure 34. DUK Festival 2019. Quam. Čačak, Serbia, 2019. Photograph ©DUK Festival.



Figure 35. Curlew. ATM. London, 2016. Photograph ©ATM.

While both artists and ecologists can benefit from mutual collaboration on these issues, many raise concerns on how these initiatives could be framed and used. In her research about reverse graffiti, Norvaišaitė notes: "Since eco communication has seen a growing mistrust when coming from the government and industries (...), and graffiti is supposedly a socio-political commentary free of mainstream influences, street art could be a potential channel of environmental communication" (Norvaišaitė, 2014: 3). As an independent practice, within SAG ecological murals could tackle biodiversity and shift attitudes, where both the artists and the viewers are directly visually engaged in its ecological messages (Arrieta, 2014), whether part of official projects or bottom-up initiatives.

Turning to local and endangered species, these artworks

could be more site-specific, linking history, biology and activism in raising awareness. A very good example is ATM (UK) who mainly depicts local species that are always connected to the local history and environment, whether present, endangered, or already lost. With continuous, contextualized and well researched bird murals, his aim is to inspire care and conservation (ATM, 2017). This approach has potential especially when involving the community - from scientists, artists, to regular people - as stakeholders, such as in the example of Curlew mural done as part of Endangered 13 conservation effort where street art raised visibility of disappearing species in the UK (Figure 39).¹⁰ The actual example of Festival Rekonstrukcija in Belgrade stands as a living example how an art initiative could foster both new production, community engagement and express 10 - <http://humannatureshow.com/endangered13/>

solidarity (Marković, 2020).

Of course, the most obvious way requires abandoning the traditional techniques and going towards experimentation, turning to moss and/or reverse graffiti, if not other art mediums. However, reverse graffiti does not equal direct ecological messages; artists could tackle nature and the urban surroundings in a wider way, beautifying neglected surfaces and improving the living atmosphere (Norvaišaitė, 2014: 57-69). At the present moment, these experimental techniques could provide both a challenge for implementation and ways of demonstrating originality, given its present lack in the Belgrade.

As a conclusion, street art and graffiti are without doubt part of the urban ecosystem, with potentials to aesthetically and critically reflect on it. Apart from its great communication power, by supporting deeper engagement, research and collaboration, as well as eco techniques and even activism, SAG in Belgrade could gain a critical edge and scientific base (as in contemporary eco art), becoming a stronger stakeholder in making the city really more green.

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