

## The development of mural art in Kosovo 2020-2022

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### Abstract :

This paper shows the graffiti art in Kosovo during the time period 2020-2022. The presented murals unfold the Kosovar and foreign artists' work in the cities of Kosovo, such as Prishtina and Ferizaj. The presented themes are of various different types in terms of their content. The graffiti works of foreign artists who exhibited their creative work at Mural Fest-Kosova in the above-mentioned years have given me a great help in developing this study. The author has carefully analyzed these graffiti and put them as they are, showing the contribution of graphic artists to contemporary art in Kosovo and beyond.

**Keywords :** Mural Art, Kosovo, 2022, etc.

### 1. Opening

Art in Kosovo has been influenced by various events during the country's history as it has early traces, and continues to develop. Graffiti is another way of making art that breaks the frames of "traditional art". Urban art ranges from simple word writing to 3D paintings. Sometimes with the language of letters and pictures, the pieces are intended to convey a social or political message that is not always easy to understand. Public spaces such as house walls, buildings, bridges, and old and damaged buildings are generally used. Not infrequently due to their unnatural presence in these places is this type of art considered as a form of vandalism or imposition on private property (Muharremi, 2022).

In recent years, public art has undergone a transformation in terms of public opinion, thus becoming a socially acceptable, respected expression and this for the fact that modern street art has the ability to through amazing drawings and details turn any wall or object however old and ugly it is into an amazing work of art, which can also carry important messages. Public works of art are an important point of a country because in addition to returning the beauty to the neighborhoods or the place where they were painted, they also attract the attention of residents and tourists. In the years when Kosovo was under Serbian administration, they took away almost all

the rights of Kosovo's citizens. One of the many disasters of the war was the fact that the Serbs took over the cultural and educational institutions, thus causing great setbacks in their development. Since the end of the war with Serbia in 1999, Kosovo has undergone many changes. In many respects, Kosovo is still facing the difficulties of a country in transition, just like many other countries in the world that have gone through wars and similar situations. Art has always been a good way for artists to express their feelings and talent and at the same time represent the country in a creative way. However, difficult conditions and post-war developments have had an impact on the development of art in general in Kosovo (Muharremi, 2020).

### 2. Graffiti in Kosovo 2020- 2022

A new mural painted on one of the busiest streets in the capital aims to raise the awareness of society and institutions about violence against women. A giant mural in blue, showing two women with bruised faces, covers a wall of a building on Agim Ramadani Street in Prishtina. Painted by the well-known artist Fitore Berisha Alisdottir, the mural is an expression of her revulsion over the violence against women in Kosovo. The artist who has 25 years of experience in art and murals told Prishtina Insight that this mural

was a necessary addition to the capital. Berisha considers *Broken Dreams* as a sign of revolution towards social changes. Berisha said she decided to paint this mural in Prishtina because such murals should be made in the capital city, where the government and other important institutions are located. According to her, in this way the message of the mural can be conveyed more easily in society. “As an artist, I have a strong emotional sensitivity to injustice, with a broken heart for the lives of women lost to the violence of their partners,” Berisha said.



Fig.1. Broken dreams' of Murdered Women Become Mural in Prishtina

She considers the work an accumulation of despair from a society and a system that has failed to create a society where such tragedies no longer occur. This project done by Berisha in cooperation with the Kosovar Center for Gender Studies started immediately after the pandemic because, according to her, cases of domestic violence increased at that time, and the number of reported cases is still high. Marigona Osmani, Sabile Mavrovqani, Zejnepe Berisha, Diana Kastrati, Hatije Dina, Valbona Ndrecaj and her daughter are just some of the names of women killed by their partners or spouses in Kosovo in recent years. “I was very appalled and it was important for me to create work with a strong message as soon as possible for all those women who had their dreams cut in half,” she added. The painter wants to create

other murals with sensitizing messages in other cities of Kosovo as well (<https://prishtinainsight.com/broken-dreams-of-the-murdered-women-become-a-mural-in-prishtina/>).

Young artists from Mural Fest Kosovo in 2020 have brightened up the greyer corners of Prishtina with dozens of painted interventions, but some have questioned whether the new works are in keeping with the city's urban art heritage. Tucked behind the large statue in Skanderbeg Square and down a small set of stairs sits what is called a pad-mounted transformer. More commonly referred to as ‘those big grey electric boxes,’ transformers are a necessary eyesore in the capital, locked steel cabinets that contain the elements required for the distribution of electricity around the city. One box in particular sends electricity to the Kosovo Government, and artist Ermira Murati decided to have fun with something as mundane as the government's electricity supply.



Fig.2. Ermira Murati paints Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' onto a pad-mounted transformer that faces the premises of the Kosovo Government. Photo: Antigone Isufi.

While this wasn't how Edvard Munch intended his most famous piece to be viewed (the original can be found in Norway's national gallery), Murati believes that context is everything and this is a great example of how the location of a piece of art

can speak as loudly as the painting itself. “This was very intentional, because of the current political situation,” says Murati. “This woman screaming is the people of Kosovo represented, who are shocked by what they are doing to us.” Over last Friday and Saturday, Murati, artist Debora Hetemi and around 20 other young people painted countless murals and installations all over the capital – ranging from an homage to ‘The Starry Night’ by Vincent van Gogh to playful, cartoonish redecorations of the Prishtina’s pedestrian crossings. The artists are from the youth wing of Mural Fest Kosovo, an annual Ferizaj-based festival that specialises in designing and executing paintings and graffiti on the sides of buildings around the country. They tell Prishtina Insight that they are happy with what they’ve accomplished. “I think Prishtina really needed this,” says Hetemi. “You don’t notice that remote corner of the town or that power box that needs a pop of colour until it’s there. It gives these little places importance.” The organiser of Mural Fest Kosovo, Lebibe Topalli, says that while she prefers that the organisation didn’t get too political, once the younger artists that she works with had the idea to paint ‘The Scream,’ she couldn’t say no. “The dissatisfaction of artists is artistically expressed dissatisfaction,” she says. According to Topalli, the Municipality of Prishtina was behind the idea for Mural Fest volunteers to paint all over the city. While she says that they were provided with barely enough money to cover their expenses, Topalli is grateful that the municipality gave Kosovo young artists free rein to express themselves artistically and politically, turning Prishtina’s centre into an outdoor art gallery.



Fig.3. Photo by Antiga Isufi

Mural art has been used in Prishtina since before the war as a method of both ‘beautifying’ grey areas of the city and spreading political messages. According to Fitore Berisha, the founder of Prishtina’s first Mural Art Group, MAG, in 2003, mural initiatives need to be carefully planned given both the history of the use of graffiti as a form of protest in Prishtina, and its quite permanent and public nature. She is unsure whether this has been achieved here. “In my opinion, murals have to be planned well and be authentic,” she tells Prishtina Insight. “It is so important that they are executed properly, as these are long lasting works that are in a public space.” Among the most recognisable interventions, Murati, Hetemi and the other young artists painted Gustav Klimt’s ‘The Kiss,’ and Pablo Picasso’s ‘Buste De Femme.’ The participants explained that these murals were a response to their own frustration over the absence of gallery and museum spaces in Kosovo, believing that this contributes to a commonly held understanding that art is inaccessible, leading to disinterest in painting as a part of Albanian culture.



Fig.4. Photo by Antigona Isufi

According to Hetemi, showcasing the work of famous international artists gives people the chance to see the most influential art in the world that people may not be aware of. "Painting is such a large part of culture, but our culture nowadays doesn't take interest or showcase the kind of artists we've had," she said. "That Kosovo's artistic history isn't on show or celebrated in the same way, makes me feel terrible." Berisha disagrees, noting that new forms of artistic expression, including the growing popularity of mural painting, is evidence to the contrary. "Especially art in public spaces is much more accessible than it used to be," she said. "In 2003 when I started the Mural Art Group, it was my passion and my goal to beautify the grey old buildings of the city

after the conflict. But it was so challenging back then to do it on our own." In response to their belief that Kosovo hasn't had the opportunity to celebrate its own artists, the Mural Fest participants also painted several of the most famous pieces by Ibrahim Kodra, an Albanian post-impressionist painter. Hetemi explains that despite Kodra's importance to Albanian artistic culture, she believes his work is barely known here. "He was one of the artists that really brought an unusual way of painting to Albania," she says. "He broke the mold for more alternative forms of art" (<https://prishtinainsight.com/wave-of-new-murals-decorate-prishtinas-centre-mag>).



Fig.5. A famous work by Ibrahim Kodra. Photo: Antigone Isufi.

MuralFest Kosovo has just wrapped up its seventh edition "ON(OFF)LINE", unveiling seven new street art murals to the town of Ferizaj. The festival ran

from 7th until 14th May 2022. The painting process of 7 murals throughout the 7 days of the 7th edition of the Festival of Murals – On(OFF)Line. Through a series of art activations, workshops and lectures in the city of Ferizaj, On(Off)line invites us to examine the many relationships, both digital and physical, that make up modern life. Invited artists for this year's festival included Maximiliano Bagnasco , Zane Prater, Gabriel Pitcher, DriDali , Mate Artist, RetryOne, En and SpringFlash. The first mural painted is titled "Kantarion" by American artist, Zane Prater. "Kantarion" brings the connection between humans and nature.

*"Leart is a young pianist from the city of Ferizaj, Kosovo. He is an artist who, as the flamencos say, has "duende"- an elevated state of emotion and artistic expression. The art of music does not acknowledge prejudice. It is a melody that makes your skin crawl and excites you. Only those with feeling, purity and love can achieve it, three words that are written on the face of my*



Fig.6. Dridali decided to paint Leart Gashi, a young musician who shows us that an extra chromosome makes you more unique. "Leart's Piano" promotes the integration of all individuals in society.



Fig.7. Spanish artist, Theo Magma, paints “Creation of the Virtual-Like” and addresses the impact of social platforms and networks on the human personality.

*friend Leart Gashi, who is pictured in this mural. Leart represents all the other talented, special kids who have so much to offer to the world. This mural honours them directly, and paints them for who they really are- unique individuals who are actually capable of wonderful things.”*

*“This mural is called “Creation of the Virtual-Like” and it comes as a representation of the modern dual existence of humans- the real-life and the social networks. It is an attempt to paint out the false image humans have created upon themselves, and the misery that is left out of the picture. On one side, I have pictured an image that appears calming, resembling the perfection of the lives and the idyllic aesthetics of what is shown on social networks. Moving to the opposite side, we find the reality of those lives which is shown totally different from what we see first. It is a representation of what lies under the facade, and the chaos of the real-life that is hidden in order to support the false,*

*perfect image of the virtual life. All for a simple “Like” that serves as a tool of validation and feeds the human ego. A feature that has transformed human interaction and perspective” (<https://www.graffitistreet.com/muralfest-kosovo-2022/>).*

### 3. Street art of serbs in Kosovo

For the first time, Serbian mural artists from the north of Mitrovica took part in the festival with the motto “Separated from the river, united by art”, proving once again that art knows no borders and no nation. Dozens of young Albanian and Serbian artists have worked together on various murals, thus turning the Ibar Bridge in the city of Mitrovica into an artistic installation. “We have decided to finally come to the Ibar bridge and change its appearance for the better.” We have Albanian and Serbian artists, since we also did the festival with the two communities. We held a camp in Vllahi where we made the sketches, after the camp we came to the city of Mitrovica in the south and in



Fig.8. Radio Kontakt Plus

the north and we started with works”, stated the Director of the NGO ‘Introduction of colour’, Bardhyl Dobroski (Muharremi, 2020). On the other hand, Milan Dobric, from the non-governmental organization ‘Link’, based in northern Mitrovica, said that the purpose of all this is to involve as many young people as possible in this activity, so that even for a few moments the problems related to politics are forgotten. According to him, it doesn’t matter which community he belongs to, because the problems and things they do are similar, while the goal is to work. “The goal is to involve as many young people and creative people as possible, and to forget for at least a few moments the problems that surround us and that are related to politics” (Protic, 2002).

The graffiti is the work of Zorđe Mijailović from Novi Pazar, who decided to take this step in order not to forget what happened yesterday. “We will not let the people forget

what happened yesterday, this will be like ‘Memento.’ I think that everyone who calls themselves Serbian will be happy because of this graffiti and will come to take pictures, to share (photos, ed.) and to encourage as many people as possible in our country to do similar things, so that we would not allow our traces and history in these areas are simply being erased. People who are like Srećko Sofronijević are our heroes, we should remember such people. Only harmony saves Serbs”, was the message of Mijailović, who was caught by a Kontakt Plus radio journalist drawing graffiti. Srećko Sofronijević was wounded yesterday in Zvečan by a member of the special unit of the Kosovo Police. In addition to him, nine other people from Zvečani and Kosovska Mitrovica were injured (<http://radiomitrovicasever.com/2021/10/14/kosovska-mitrovica-graft-za-nezaborav/>).



Fig.9. Serbian graffiti in North Mitrovica from a group called Brigade North urging “resistance” to Pristina’s efforts to re-register vehicles with old license plates issued by Belgrade.

Graffiti appealing to Serb identity to inspire resistance to Kosovo authorities has appeared in the divided city of Mitrovica and other municipalities, as ethnic and diplomatic tensions surround an ongoing vehicle-registration dispute that enters a risky new phase in the Balkans. The stenciled Cyrillic messages in Serbian and in the red-white-blue of the Serbian flag appeared on walls and public spaces on November 13 in North Mitrovica, a mostly Serb municipality separated from the heavily ethnically Albanian municipality of Mitrovica by the Ibar River. The targets included a utility box next to a downtown statue of medieval ruler Lazar Hrebeljanovic. The messages purport to be from a group called Brigade North and say that “from November 21, it’s everyone’s duty to resist every step of the way” (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbian-license-plates-fines-resistance-graffiti/32137397.html>).

### Conclusion

This type of art was not initially given the attention it deserved, but over time in Kosovo, mainly in Prishtina, there have been many improvements. Through art, young artists have managed to express not only their creativity, but also convey important messages to the society. The organization of Mural Fest Kosova after 2008 internationalizes the work of Kosovar creators by making them interweave their experiences with international graphic artists. In the cities

where Albanians live, graffiti reveal various topics such as the situation of women in Kosovo in different dimensions, murals that reflect the life of the disabled community and various political topics that satirize the general political life in Kosovo and which reflect in an ironic form the work of Kosovar politicians. However, the murals reflected in Kosovo during 2020-2022 are different in a specific part of Kosovo, i.e., in the city of Mitrovica where the political situation is different from other parts of Kosovo. In this city, the Serbs, who are separated in their enclave, have also manifested their dissatisfaction with the general political circumstances towards the Kosovo Albanians since 1999. Recently, these revolts were also expressed in their creativity through various graffiti. Most of these reflected murals also show their generalizing character. As can be seen, hatred towards Kosovars prevails, and numerous threatening messages for the government of Kosovo have been written on them. The study with this diversity of murals for this 2-year time period represents the essence of the general life in multi-ethnic Kosovo with its cultural and religious diversity.

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