

**Redrawing the Walls: Street Art in Belgrade**

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*Abstract:*

This research examines street art in Belgrade as a means of changing the political, social, and cultural atmosphere of Belgrade, Serbia. Street art is examined as a means of breaking down consumer/producer binaries, an alternative to dominant culture, as part of the contemporary city, and as a transformative use of and re-appropriation of imagery. The research data was collected through semi-structured interviews in the Spring of 2009. Students, artists, and former artists were interviewed in order to collect data. In addition, participant observation and visual analysis contributed to and gave context to the interview based data. Ultimately, it was discovered that the street art in Belgrade reflects the social and political climate of Belgrade and that street artists are actively engaged with the urban space in order to contribute positively to their environments.

## Introduction

A collection of writings and imagery created by everyday people adorns the city streets of Belgrade, Serbia. Some refer to this collection of spray paint, wall paint, and marker ink as graffiti, others as street art. The images on the walls range from the scrawling of school children, to the work of organized graffiti crews, to the delicate stenciled images of pop culture icons, to the dissemination of political ideologies. Each style is present throughout the city and all street artists are interested in leaving their mark in the public sphere. In examining what is on the walls, one can understand the different voices competing for space in contemporary Belgrade. Represented are competing political ideologies and conceptions of culture.

Street art exists within a unique cultural space. The aesthetic aspects of street art situate these works in discourses on visual culture. However, due to the artist's rejection of the historical tradition of the gallery, street art is removed slightly from the realm of high art and placed more into the discipline of popular culture. In addition, the conceptual aspects of street art place these works and those who create them in dialogue with discourses on political science and discussions of public versus private spaces in the contemporary city. It is because of the unique position of street art, which crosses academic genres, that street art is able to reflect and deepen our insights of a specific cultural location.

This research examines how art is used as a form of political action and as a tool to change and alter everyday life in an urban city. In addition, it attempts to create a window into understanding contemporary Belgrade politically and socially, especially from the perspective of the generation of young adults who are now between twenty and thirty years of age. This is the generation that is primarily engaging in graffiti and street art. These voices are in conversation

with each other in public spaces through the medium of street art and have a distinct perspective on their city and futures in Belgrade.

In my research I organized what I found on the streets into three main categories. These categories, however, are fluid. There are exceptions that cross between categories. Everything on the city walls created by individuals outside of official institutions I considered as street art for the purposes of this research. For example, I am not interested in commercial advertisements, billboards or official street signs. Within street art I have created three main categories: hip-hop style graffiti, stencil art, and political text.

### **Defining Street Art**

For the purposes of this paper graffiti is defined as imagery or lettering that is influenced by hip-hop culture or is aesthetically derived from the hip-hop style graffiti that emerged in the 1970s in the United States. This graffiti often consists of names and lettering, which may or may not be legible to the average passersby, but is almost always legible to other graffiti writers.

The second category used in this research is stencil art. Many of the images found in public are applied with the use of stencils.<sup>1</sup> These stencils are often re-appropriated pop imagery, from movie stars, to singers, to historical figures. The artists who use stencils are interested in the aesthetic appeal of the stencil and the ability to re-create an image in multiple locations. This category primarily consists of images that are easily recognizable cultural texts, decorative stencils, and imagery that is not explicitly political.

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<sup>1</sup> A stencil is usually an image or text cut out of a piece of cardboard, Acetate or Mylar using a knife, artist's knife, scissors or a box cutter. Acetate and Mylar are sheets of thin clear plastic, making the stencils more durable. The artist can then place the stencil on the wall and spray spray-paint liberally and quickly without having to worry about detailed spraying.

The third category is that of political text. This category includes some stenciled phrases, however, the primary goal of the text in this category is the projecting or disseminating of a particular political perspective. These texts are not interested in aesthetic appeal in contrast to the other two categories I am examining. They are often written free hand with little use of imagery, beyond that of a symbol or logo of a political organization. In addition, the same phrases are repeated throughout the city in order to create the sense that the ideology the text promotes is the dominant ideology in the public sphere. Unlike hip-hop graffiti, pieces in the political text category are typically clearly written in order to best project their message to the average citizen.

In examining these three categories I am interested in the ability of those with no access to traditional forms of cultural production, such as television, radio, or newspapers, to express their perspectives and opinions in the public sphere. These individuals who are creating street art are influencing everyday urban culture in Belgrade. They are shaping the everyday lives of Belgrade citizens in unique ways by altering the urban landscape with their street actions.

### **Methodologies**

Due to restrictions of time and resources my research focused on the individual experience and motivations of those who use art in public spaces as a means of creating alternative voices in contemporary Belgrade. My primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with local artists. This includes artists who are explicitly creating political and social commentary and those who are not explicitly creating politically minded work. My interviews followed an interview guide, however our conversations often surpassed the questions I had prepared.

In the writing of this research paper I used pseudonyms for my interviews in order to protect their identities. Many street artists have selected their own pseudonyms in order to sign their work in public without incriminating themselves. When this was the case I simply adopted their self-chosen pseudonym. In interviews with public figures I choose not to use pseudonyms due to their already public status.

My interviews were rooted in a feminist methodology. I focused on the personal experiences of the artist in order to, as Feminist researcher Patricia Leavy writes, “merge the public and private, individual and social, illustrating the falseness of these dichotomous constructs, and the relationship between them in lived reality.”<sup>2</sup> It is a particular feminist goal to reveal how the personal, individual, and everyday experience is also political and is deeply intertwined with large scale, common, experiences as well. I believe my interviews strove to bridge the dichotomous divides of private and public, and individual and community. They flowed freely between personal perspectives and discussion of mega-narratives, such as the history of Serbia to mini-narratives, such as personal experiences. In doing so, my interviews began to break down false barriers.

In addition to interviews, I used participant observation to expand my research. This included accompanying local street artists into the streets while they created their pieces. In addition, one stencil artists provided me with a how-to lesson on creating stencils. These experiences shaped my understanding of the process and the time and effort it requires to create such pieces, as well as the dedication required of these artists.

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<sup>2</sup>Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy. *Feminist Research Practice*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2007. Pg.155

Finally, I conducted a visual analysis of street art. This included examining the content and style of the pieces I viewed. In order to conduct a visual analysis, part of my research included the documentation of various kinds of street art throughout the city.

### **Creating the Canvas: Social and Political History**

Street art is specific to the city within which it is created. It exists in a particular location and can rarely be removed or relocated. Therefore, in order to examine street art it is imperative to understand the city and culture in which it exists. In order to understand the contemporary social and political context of Belgrade, one must look at the recent historical past.

Serbia emerged in the late 1990s as an independent nation after almost a decade of wars. These wars resulted in the collapse and division of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. While none of these wars took place on Serbian soil, the international community placed Serbia in the role of perpetrator and therefore placed sanctions on the country and ultimately resorted to bombing Belgrade in order to end the war that was occurring in Bosnia. However, in Serbia, not only were the lives of political elites and military officials affected by these international decisions but the lives of everyday people living in Belgrade as well. An essential text on the transformation of everyday life in Serbia during the 1990s is Eric Gordy's book [The Culture of Power in Serbia](#), where he addresses the destruction of cultural and political alternatives in Serbia during the 1990s by writing, "the regime's strategies of self-preservation can be found in everyday life—in the destruction of alternatives....the story of everyday life in contemporary Belgrade, then, is that of a regime attempting to close off avenues of information,

expression, and sociability”<sup>3</sup>. While Gordy wrote of life in the 1990s, the destruction of alternatives and subcultures in Serbia lingers today.

Eric Gordy’s book explains the culture and the environment that the young individuals creating street art today experienced as children. Without prompting, every interviewee ultimately touched upon the sanctions during the 1990s and the lack of cultural expression that Eric Gordy addresses in his book. Even as children, while they may not have “felt it (war) on their skin” as artist TKV said,<sup>4</sup> their everyday experiences were shaped by the sanctions, war, and collapsing economic conditions of Serbia.

Particularly relevant in developing an understanding of this region during the 1990s is Jasmina Tesanovic’s book Diary of a Political Idiot. In which Tesanovic attempts to understand the actions and repercussions of her country’s actions and political decisions. Tesanovic writes, “In my country uniforms always take away the power of speech from citizens because uniforms carry guns, and citizens carry fear. So there is a permanent civil war going on between uniforms and civilians.”<sup>5</sup> Tesanovic is speaking directly of the 1990s, in which Serbia functioned on a wartime economy where police and politicians had uncontrolled power and weapons, which were the only sources of authority.

Even though it is a decade later, the period of the 1990s has shaped the present social and economic conditions. After the over-throw of the political, pro-nationalist, dictator Slobadan Milosevic who many cite as responsible for the wars of the 1990s and the economic collapse of Serbia, there were shifts in political power in Serbia. Many of my interviewees reiterated that people who controlled money and power during the Milosevic regime, however, continue to hold positions of power today. Therefore, the guns are perhaps not as obvious and the divide not as

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<sup>3</sup>Eric Gordy. *The Culture of Power in Serbia*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. Pg. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jasmina Tesanovic. *The Diary of a Political Idiot*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000. Pg. 57.

clear, but the dominant political voices still overwhelm the voices of the civilians who distinctly separate themselves from the political regime in power.

A decade later the landscape looks a little different and the political parties have new names. However, the destruction of subcultures and alternative cultures remains a part of contemporary Belgrade. In an interview with the young activist and artist Anja, she stated, “During the wars culture started to die. The regime destroyed subcultures.”<sup>6</sup> For Anja, the destruction of subcultures was replaced with a superficial culture that is mostly comprised of imported trends and the emergence of turbo folk.<sup>7</sup> In reaction, Belgrade has seen the emergence of alternative cultural centers such as the Center for Cultural Decontamination and the Cultural Center REX. These centers provide the physical space for alternative voices that was unavailable and impossible in the 1990s. In addition, their physical presence creates a place for the networking of alternative cultures, which is imperative to its development. There has also been a reemergence of subcultures in the form of art, activism, and music. While there is a blooming alternative scene in opposition to that of the mainstream, it is also necessary to remember that those participating and creating alternatives are a minority in Belgrade.

The political and economic elite controls dominant culture. In an interview with Jasmina Tesanovic, I asked Jasmina about the war between civilians and uniforms and if the battle continued on today. She responded “I think it is still present but less acutely, the guns are institutions nowadays. Street artists are part of this non-national, or nationalist’s culture. They are the avant-garde, severely persecuted by the police as vandals.”<sup>8</sup> For Jasmina there is still a battle between the sub and dominant culture. Anyone who is claiming the streets and the public

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<sup>6</sup> Personal Interview with Anja conducted by Emily Levitt on 10 March, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Turbo Folk is a sub-genre of music that originated in Serbia in the 1990s. It is a mix of traditional Serbian music, Turkish music, and contemporary rock and roll and pop. In its emergence in the 1990s it was associated with war criminals and corruption. Today, it is widely popular in Serbia and common in many clubs.

<sup>8</sup> Personal Interview with Jasmina Tesanovic conducted by Emily Levitt on 11 April 2009.

spaces for themselves is participating in this battle against the government's monopoly on public space and public opinion.

Jasmina's reference to the police in relation to their cruelty was often discussed in my interviews with street artists. Two stories appeared in regards to the police in Belgrade. One is of their ability to beat, persecute or threaten any individual without justification or an avenue for reparation. The second narrative about police in Belgrade is that of their disorganization and their inability to find clear and precise laws on graffiti. It is more often private owners who are quicker to clean, erase, or create negative circumstances for street artists. The lack of clear laws creates an opportunity for street artists, but at a high risk of no regulation on repercussions for so-called vandalism.

When asked about the influence of Serbia's past on their art most street artist responded with similar answers. The surface answer often placed their work in a bigger cultural context than Belgrade. For example, Graffiti artist D spoke of graffiti and street art as a global trend, something bigger than Belgrade or Serbia. He claimed his work was part of that global trend, not at all related to Belgrade's social context. D said he didn't think Belgrade really had a specific or special kind of street art.<sup>9</sup> However, shortly after this answer D began to speak of growing up in the 1990s and having no place for a creative outlet. He spoke of having nothing to do after school and no rules to follow. He also spoke about the lack of budget for the arts in Belgrade today.<sup>10</sup> This interview took place at the 25<sup>th</sup> of May museum, where D explained how he was the last generation of pioneers<sup>11</sup> and that his early youth was shaped by living in Yugoslavia. While I asked no questions about Yugoslavia or D's youth, it seemed rather important for him

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<sup>9</sup> Personal Interview with D conducted by Emily Levitt on 16 April 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Young Pioneers was a children's organization and movement operated by the communist party during the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

that I understood the political and social changes that happened in the 1990s, especially how it affected his childhood.

It became clear that these artists may not draw the connection clearly for themselves, but from an outsider's perspective their motivations for painting in public streets is clearly linked with their frustrations with the contemporary social-political situation of Belgrade, which is a result of the destruction of normal life in the 1990s and the destruction of cultural alternatives. The situation and events of the 1990 shaped them as individuals, their physical city, and therefore has influenced and shaped their art.

### **The Emergence of Hip Hop Style Graffiti**

The history of graffiti is often debated and intertwined with discussions of hip-hop. The modern appearance of graffiti occurred in Philadelphia in the early sixties, when graffiti artists Cornbread and Cool Earl began to scribble their names throughout Philadelphia<sup>12</sup>. Graffiti spread to New York and other major cities by the late sixties and became a way for youth to define themselves as successful within a particular culture. Often youth strived to make their graffiti name as widespread and well known as possible. It provided youth with a way to establish them and create a sense of power.<sup>13</sup>

In interviews with early graffiti artists in New York and LA, however, it is clear the emergence of graffiti was a cultural evolution of its own merit. Until the coining of the term graffiti, many writers simply said they were going out to write. New York based 1970s graffiti artist Mico told the New York Times, "We didn't call it graffiti in the early seventies. We would say, 'Let's go writing tonight.'" Graffiti is a term that the New York Times coined, and it

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<sup>12</sup> Dimitri Ehrlich and Gregor Ehrlich. "Graffiti In Its Own Words." New York Magazine 26 June 2006.

<sup>13</sup> *Bomb it*. Dir. George Kelling. 2008.

denigrates the art because it was invented by youth of color”.<sup>14</sup> Mico is suggesting the defining of graffiti by those outside of graffiti culture. While this subject is debated even among graffiti historians today, it is clear that graffiti became an outlet for youth who felt unprivileged or without options for self-expression.

In the documentary film *Style Wars* (1983) by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, the interviewees speak of “bombing” and “going all city”. These terms represent different forms of graffiti; to “go all city” meant to have your name on trains that covered all parts of the city, uptown, downtown, Brooklyn, Queens, et cetera. This represented what many graffiti artists strived for in the 1970s in the United States. Mico states in his interview, “we all had one thing in common: we wanted to be famous”.<sup>15</sup> Graffiti offered city kids who didn’t have much of a chance to be known, create a name for themselves. As one artist states in the film *Style Wars*, “it is like a game, someone gives you a name and you see what you can make with it.” Throughout the 1970s and 1980s graffiti transformed cities like L.A. and New York into expansive canvases for the city’s youth. In contemporary culture graffiti artists are brought together globally via the Internet. Due to the documentation and study of hip-hop style graffiti many graffiti artist are well aware of the historical past, and view him or herself as part of graffiti legacy that has a clear linear trajectory. This historical story of hip-hop graffiti is known in Belgrade and many graffiti artists cite the same motivations for their own street actions.

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<sup>14</sup> Dimitri Ehrlich and Gregor Ehrlich. "Graffiti In Its Own Words." New York Magazine 26 June 2006. 30 Apr. 2009 <<http://nymag.com/guides/summer/17406/>>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## A Global Art Movement: A History of Stencil Art

*“The first paintings were on walls by cavemen with stencils”-Leon<sup>16</sup>*

Stenciling is often cited as a subsection of graffiti; however, stenciling with spray paint onto public walls is not rooted in the same history as the 1970's hip-hop and graffiti culture in the United States. Rather, stenciling can be traced back to Paris, specifically to the artist known as Blek le Rat.

Blek le Rat is often cited as the godfather of stencil art.<sup>17</sup> He began working in Paris in 1980 at which point he was responsible for “the sudden appearance on the subways of the Périphérique of hundreds of scampering rats.”<sup>18</sup> Blek le Rat began creating life size stencils to transform the walls of Paris. His imagery ranged from political figures to young children to military soldiers. His style and even his imagery have been adopted in some ways by the more famous Banksy. Banksy is known globally for politically engaged, life-size stencils. His subject matter often is that of anti-war and anti-capitalism. It is assumed that Banksy himself comes from the background of a hip-hop style graffiti artist, working in a graffiti crew before creating his own stencils. According to journalist Lauren Collins, Banksy started creating graffiti around 1993. She writes,

His graffiti began appearing on trains and walls around Bristol; by 2001, his blocky spray-painted signature had cropped up all over the United Kingdom, eliciting both civic hand-wringing and comparisons to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. Vienna, San Francisco, Barcelona, and Paris followed, along with forays into pranksterism and more traditional painting, but Banksy has never shed the graffitist's habit of operating under a handle.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with Leon conducted by Emily Levitt on 16 April, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Januszczak, Waldemar. "Blek le Rat, The Man Who Gave Birth to Banksy." *The Sunday Times* 8 June 2008 [London, England]. 30 Apr. 2009 <<http://nymag.com/guides/summer/17406/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Lauren Collins. "Banksy Was Here." *The New Yorker* 8 May 2007 [London, England]. 30 Apr. 2009 <[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/14/070514fa\\_fact\\_collins?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/14/070514fa_fact_collins?currentPage=all)>.

Banksy brought politically-minded stencil art into the art communities and streets of the world, inspiring many young artists, including those in Belgrade, to engage in this form of political commentary and artistic endeavors. Today stencil art has become a worldwide trend, a trend that Blek le Rat himself claims, “is going to be more global than any art movement has ever been.”<sup>20</sup> Blek le Rat is perhaps responsible for the emergence of stencil art, however, it is the now famous artist Banksy who transformed stenciling into a global phenomenon. When speaking to stencil artists in Belgrade, it is clear that the global culture of stencil art has influenced and shaped the methods and motivations of these young artists.

While Banksy and Blek le Rat are major influences, it is also important to realize their works are all site-specific, commenting on unique contemporary social problems. For example, Banksy created fake British Pounds with the face of Princess Diana in place of the Queen. In my interview with the stencil artist TKV, she states,

I think your environment, your street, is an influence on your art. For me, it wouldn't make any sense to do things like Banksy because he is from this completely other social and in every way different environment than we are here. It wouldn't make sense for me to do stuff like him because he is a critic of his own environment. Well, it is a global environment, but I think we are third world country and we have more essential problems to address.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that TKV is aware of Banksy and even influenced by him, but she is also influenced by his attune attention to the environment and context of his art. Therefore, TKV gives close attention to the locality of where she is making her stencils and how her art is directly related to her environment, which she labels as “third world.”

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<sup>20</sup> As qtd. in: Januszczak, Waldemar. "Blek le Rat, The Man Who Gave Birth to Banksy." The Sunday Times 8 June 2008 [London, England]. 30 Apr. 2009 <<http://nymag.com/guides/summer/17406/>>.

<sup>21</sup> Personal Interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

Imagery produced by stencils fits within a larger discussion of contemporary culture and the post-modern trend of the re-appropriation of imagery. Through the re-appropriation of pop culture a conversation emerges between dominant mainstream culture, historical characters, and the present day subculture of which graffiti and stencil art typically included within. The appearance of mainstream culture in this alternative form reveals the interplay between the two cultures and emphasizes the fact they exist within the same physical space. It is clear these artists who are using re-appropriated imagery or interacting with dominant culture rather than simply rejecting all forms of contemporary culture.

### **“Be Young and Shut Up”: A History of Political Text**

In May of 1968 student protests broke out in France. The event, now referred to simply as May '68, marks an important ideological shift in European thought. However, the riots of May '68 also created a sort of template for left-minded, socially engaged youth. Anonymous students claimed the streets as their ideological battleground by painting slogans across the walls of Paris. This includes the relatively famous slogan “Be young and shut up”. These political texts may seem like a distant connection to street art today, however, across contemporary Belgrade memorial stencils and political messages directly address the events of May '68. These texts and images tend to appear near the faculties, especially the Faculty of Philosophy.

Political messages from both ends of the political spectrum are present in the city today. It seems that May '68 introduced the idea of the public walls as a place of ideological battle, a battle that is alive in Belgrade today.

### **The Post-Modern City: Theories on Space, Art and Politics**

During the 1960s a new era of social thought emerged. The dominance of major metropolitan cities demanded new theoretical approaches that analyzed the unique physical and psychological effects of the new urban city and the redefining of public spaces. The student riots of 1968 were accompanied by the emergence of a collective that called itself the Situationists International. One primary writer and theorist that emerged from the situationists is Guy Debord. In his essay “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics”, Debord writes, “This critical art is what the situationists have summed up in their theory of détournement. Such an art must not only be critical in its content, it must also be self-critical in its form”<sup>22</sup>. In bringing art into the streets and by using stencils, a form of reproduction and re-appropriation that is the culmination of a post-modern society, stencil artists in particular are creating an art form that is critical of the art world itself and are transforming artistic imagery into a more accessible form of social critique. In addition they are using mainstream imagery to challenge mainstream assumptions, such as the use of famous women authors in stencils in a society that does not recognize female accomplishments equally to those of their male counterparts.

In addition to providing social critique, the use of imagery is important to the situationists who view the contemporary social world as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”.<sup>23</sup> Guy Debord labels the contemporary social relationship as the “spectacle”. In a society of a spectacle, the world of imagery and media replaces in some ways a reality and reflects reality to the extent that two are rather indistinguishable. The spectacle of imagery “is not something added to the real world — not a decorative element, so to speak. On

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<sup>22</sup> Guy Debord. “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics”. Kalamazoo, MI: Black & Red, 1963. Apr. 2009 <<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/>>

<sup>23</sup> Guy Debord. The Society of the Spectacle. Kalamazoo, MI: Black & Red, 1977. 30 Apr. 2009 <[http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub\\_contents/4](http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/4)>.

the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality"<sup>24</sup>. For Debord, the sense of sight is the primary tool for understanding contemporary culture. It is vision that becomes the dominant mode of cultural diffusion. In this sense, one can grasp the importance of visual imagery that is digested by individuals on an everyday basis. Part of this visual text and spectacle is the ever-present graffiti that is in every major western city.

Graffiti and street art are visual representations of culture and cultural debates. However, this visual representation of culture and politics has become political itself and a cultural movement of its own right. The use of political text and pop imagery are recycled, however, they take on a new meaning and a new reality when transformed into this visual form and placed in public spaces.

In critiquing the contemporary social situation and by using images from pop culture and history, artists who work public spaces are creating visual reminders of the cities present and historical state. In some sense, they are creating and shaping the way history is remembered and represented. Debord writes on the necessity of social critique in the form of art. He writes, "The coherence of this society cannot be understood without an all-encompassing critique, illuminated by the inverse project of a liberated creativity, the project of everyone's control of all levels of their own history"<sup>25</sup>. Debord claims creative actions are a form of social commentary and critique and as a method for recreating, defining, and shaping history. In this context, street artists in Belgrade are using creative tools to redefine history.

Direct efforts to shape and preserve certain aspects of history are present in the Belgrade streets. This includes varied representations of past events and important historical moments or

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Guy Debord. "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics". Kalamazoo, MI: Black & Red, 1963. Apr. 2009 <<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/>>

periods of Serbian history. One such reconstruction of history includes the spraying of the year 1389, which references the battle of Kosovo, between Serbia and the Ottoman Empire that was lost by the Serbian people in 1389. Other historical critique or actions that contribute to the shaping of passerby's perspectives are the communist references, and the prevalent stencil that commemorates the May 1968 riots and reads "40 years, 68-08". These images and text shape which historical events are constantly present and debatable in the public sphere. The presence of political text on the walls serve as reminders of which historical events remain important or valuable to particular groups.

In some cases the historical shaping of public spaces through graffiti, street art, or other creative endeavors, is specific to precise locations in the city. One such example is the Faculty of Philosophy. On June 3, 1968, student riots peaked with the occupation of the university buildings in Belgrade. Over 10,000 students overtook the university buildings, renaming the university "red university of Karl Marx". The image below is the university building with the political text. The picture was taken in April of 2009.



It is evident in this photo that the history of this building and the student riots of 1968 carry cultural significance in contemporary Belgrade. This photo also reveals another important aspect of public political text: the opportunity for competing ideologies and their equality in

voice once placed onto public walls. This is evident in the addition of the word “obraz”, written in Cyrillic, on the left side of the photo. Obraz is a right-wing, para-political, nationalist group. They have been classified by the media source B92 as a neo-nazi organization.<sup>26</sup> The word Obraz literally translates to something close to face of honor, or not to “lose face”, or cheek of honor. It is clear in this photo that Obraz was then crossed with red at which point, it appears someone added the hammer and the sickle, reasserting communist symbols and a communist associated color over the “Obraz”. The Obraz name and symbol is prevalent in the streets of Belgrade today, often overlapping with socialist group’s symbols and names, such as the prevalent appearance of “SKOJ”, which is the Serbian acronym for the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia.

The presence of these battling ideologies on faculty buildings reveals that these issues are alive and are debated today among Belgrade youth. They are clear messages to other citizens that these historical moments are not forgotten and are reintegrated into society in new forms.

### **A Street Tour of Belgrade:**

#### **Surface Readings**

The canvas that is Belgrade has taken on paint from every perspective. Walk into any school-yard or any small street and you will discover scrawled names, love messages, territorial claims marking neighborhoods, hearts, nationalist symbols and communist quotes. While there is a significant amount of love notes written in a simple script, I am choosing to focus on and analyze those items on the walls that are moving beyond these basic desires to leave your name on a wall. I will use my three categories defined earlier to organize my data.

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2005&mm=12&dd=10&nav\\_id=182260](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2005&mm=12&dd=10&nav_id=182260)

In Belgrade hip-hop influenced graffiti is present throughout the city. From the city center outward there is easily recognizable hip-hop style graffiti, including names, lettering, and a few character pieces. There are several spots around the city that are known as places to see and do hip-hop style graffiti. This includes a long public wall that is adjacent to Lake Ada. Most artists refer to this wall as a legal space for graffiti, a place where you do not have to worry about the police. In addition, there is an out of use amphitheater that is considered legal, as well as a few other spots around the city. However, hip-hop graffiti can be seen in almost any neighborhood or street corner.

Several graffiti crews exist in Belgrade and each crew seems to be aware of the other crew's presence. The image below is a general example of hip-hop style graffiti, using bright colors and bubble letters. The image is not making a political statement but rather is functioning as a sort of advertisement for the graffiti crew PS.



Particularly interesting however, is the graffiti crew E ++. While they call themselves graffiti artists and one can find the words “graffiti art” and “street art” in their pieces, their work is very distinct and atypical for graffiti artists. The pieces take on a form more similar to murals and as individuals they are not interested in hip-hop style lettering. Below is an example of their work on the side of an apartment building outside the city center.



While the work of E++ is vastly different, it still incorporates motifs from Serbian culture. In the image above the flag on the ship is similar to that of the Serbian Cross and has letters written in Cyrillic. However, the letters on this flag are b, b, g, k, rather than the typical four Ss. In another 3++ piece there is a figure who is speaking in english and carrying a briefcase with the US dollar sign. While it is difficult to know the intentions of the creators, it seems as if the use of latin script and english is associated with wealth and class. The work by E++ is often whimsical due to use of characters, animals, and imaginary scenarios. These pieces add color and draw attention to the gray alleys where they are painted.

The highest prevalence of stenciled images is in the city center, most particularly in the neighborhood of Dorcol. There are three main stencil artists in Belgrade. They include TKV, MIR, and 352. The work of TKV consists of Asian influenced pieces, such as elephants and Bollywood movie stars as well as the re-appropriation of popular cultural figures, such as French actress Audrey Tautou, Virginia Wolf, “The Kiss” by artist Klimt, artist Marcel Duchamp, artist Frida Kahlo, writer Edgar Allen Poe, milk cartons that read missing: with the image of a brain,

and a female figure covered in flowers, titled at the bottom, “celebrate life”. In other pieces by TKV there are anonymous individuals, often of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as a series of women’s figures. TKV recently branched into the world of free-hand street art, introducing a piece that is quickly taking over Belgrade. Her free hand piece typically takes on some form of an eye, with a flame and often with an infinity sign near by.

The work of MIR is also diverse. It includes a piece of a women’s torso with the words “always in fashion cold contraception” underneath her torso. Also in MIR collection is a stencil of a well known TV personality saying “dobro veče” (good evening in Serbian) and a cowboy wielding a pistol. MIR’s works also comment on popular culture, from action figures such as Optimus Prime, to an image of Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer smoking, to other cartoon figures. In some of MIR’s work there seems to be a theme of outlets, or plugging in. One stencil by MIR is that of a brain with an electrical cord and plug in place of the brain stem. In another piece there is a fly with an electrical plug. MIR’s work is widespread throughout the city, however, his or her identity remained unknown throughout my research.

On the subject of political text, there is a diverse representation of perspectives and text. On the far-left of political ideologies are the text written by communist groups such as SKOJ. These writings range from the simple writing of “SKOJ” in free hand, typically with red spray paint, usually accompanied by the sickle and hammer. However, there is also more elaborate stenciling as well. These stencils are primarily texts. The most common I found is the piece of poetry, which translates to, “as the horizon of their wishes burned red like communism, ask not whether we could go back”. It is clear the left is mythologizing the past, wishing to return to a communist system and re-imagining it as something constructive and positive for the everyday

persons. Other communist text are short phrases such as, “jobs for everyone”. These phrases are often accompanied by the sickle and hammer or the SKOJ name.

Also situated on the left side of the political spectrum, and closely tied to socialist and communist ideology is the text that surrounds the faculties of Belgrade. A series of stenciled phrases near Studentski Trg (Student Square) proclaim such phrases as: “Students for Students” and “Education for Everyone”. These messages are written in latin script and are clear and legible. Messages from the political left, including communist’s poetry, tend to be written in Latin script, although SKOJ is sometimes written in Cyrillic. However, all the stencils addressing education in Belgrade are written in Latin rather than Cyrillic script.

The use of different alphabets reveals different political goals and alignments. In using the Latin alphabet for the stencils on education, the creators are sending a message of universality and progressiveness. While the Latin alphabet itself is not progressive or a creation of left wing politics, it is a rejection of the Cyrillic script. The Cyrillic script has been revived in Serbia since the fall of Yugoslavia in order to reconnect Serbia with its historical past. In doing so, contemporary Serbia is distinguishing itself from the other nations that existed in Yugoslavia and is attempting to establish a clear historical lineage to the Kingdom of Serbs. The stencils that are promoting free, universal education, are attempting to rekindle some ideas from the communist era. Therefore, in using the Latin alphabet they are distinguishing themselves from nationalist groups and ideologies. Existing on the left, but not as direct as the communist statements is the text that reads, “In 2009 I wish...” This text exists, on the left side of the political spectrum because it is in opposition to the political right’s tendency to rely on past historical events, such as 1389, as justifications for contemporary politics. This particular text also invites the interaction of the public, an aspect of street art that I will address later.

On the right several para-political groups have taken up their battle on the street walls. This includes the radical group Obraz. The Obraz symbol also resembles the cross bones symbol that was common of the Chetnik<sup>27</sup> movement. In addition Obraz uses the Cyrillic alphabet. The combination of these elements creates an image and symbol that references the historical Kingdom of Serbia. In many ways it is calling to memory the distinct historical moments that distinguish Serbia from its neighboring countries. This is often associated with right wing political movements that are resisting such political moves as working towards joining the European Union and reconciling or working to explore the events of the 1990s and the atrocities that occurred between the countries of the former Yugoslavia. In this way, they are looking to recall a period of Serbian history that erases or ignores the period in which Serbia was part of the socialist Yugoslavia.

Also included in this group of political messages that glorifies a historical mythological past before Yugoslavia is the repeated freehand images of the Serbian Cross. The Serbian Cross, according to locals, dates to the Byzantine Empire. The Cross contains the letter S in each corner. One common interpretation of the letter S four times is the slogan, "Only Unity Saves the Serbs". This slogan is particularly relevant today in regards to the debate of Kosovo. By evoking historical imagery and placing it across the city, the creators of this graffiti are attempting to evoke emotions that typically would encourage Serbians to resist the recognition of Kosovo as an independent country. Recognizing the independence of Kosovo would destroy this "ancient" symbolism of Serbian unity and homeland.

Another common sight is that of the year 1389. Prevalent throughout all of Belgrade, 1389 stands both for an organized para-political organization with unofficial ties to right-wing

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<sup>27</sup> Chetniks were a Serbian-nationalist paramilitary organization before and during WWI and WWII. In recent history Serb paramilitary troops during the Yugoslav break up self-identified as chetniks, often adopting symbols of this chetnik identity.

political parties as well as a reminder of a particular historical and political perspective. In addition to storming streets with the names of their political groups there is also a live debate happening on the streets over particular political issues. These are issues that tend to be polarized in Serbia between left and right political ideologies. The two most common seen on the streets is the issue of joining the European Union and joining Nato. Common tags include “NATO=Star of David”. In addition it is common to see the letters EU written on a wall then circled, then crossed out, and then often with some message written underneath.

As both the left and right participate in this mythological recreation of Serbian history it becomes clear that there is a tendency to look towards the past for solutions to the present and future. This historical eye permeates all kinds of culture present in Belgrade. In my interview with a Student, who I will call Marko, he spoke of this sense of looking to the past as a place for constructing contemporary culture. He says,

[Beijing]can afford to wipe out 5,000 year old artifacts to clean the space to make room for new culture. This contrasts with the European view of culture, which is ultimately about preservation and conservation. Europe is starting to look like a huge mausoleum, a huge graveyard, and all we are trying to do is to shine better the marble or the tombstone.<sup>28</sup>

In some ways these political text that are recalling the past are contributing to this preservation rather than creation of something new, although it is clear that they are taking on new forms and motivations. However, in contrast those creating graffiti and other street art are using the older template of the city to recreate and transform older spaces into something culturally new. The city is being transformed from the remains of a bombed Southeastern European city to a contemporary art gallery, filled with social and political commentary literally written on the city walls.

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<sup>28</sup> Personal interview with Marko conducted by Emily Levitt on 15 March, 2009.

### **Ownership, Value, and the Rejection of Capitalism**

Graffiti, Street art and political messages found on the walls cannot be bought and sold. Michel de Certeau in his book The Practice of Everyday Life, addresses the way individuals manipulate the everyday situations in their life in order to make contemporary life their own. In some ways this is the activity in which street artists are engaging. They are taking everyday objects and their city streets and transforming them. This need to use the everyday situation and change it relates to Certeau's belief that the majority of people have been placed in the role of consumer rather than producers, and yet in many ways these individuals who are outside typical producing roles are participating in like-minded, producer activities. He writes

this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself.<sup>29</sup>

Certeau is suggesting that even acts that typically do not qualify as producing maintain similar qualities. But it is in these acts that are atypical acts of production that individuals usually consider only as consumers can take on the role of producer. Thus, although street artists have no access to typical means of production, whether that is mass media, money, or political power, and despite the fact they exist within a capitalist culture they are actively altering their everyday lives on a very basic level, which is changing the physical landscape that surrounds them and therefore producing a new cultural phenomenon.

In Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Althusser claims that ideology is inescapable and all controlling. Althusser also claims that production is ideologically controlled in order to allow the "machine of repression", which is the state, to maintain the ruling class power over the working classes through controlling methods of

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<sup>29</sup>, Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, 1984.

production.<sup>30</sup> If Althusser's theory of ideology is true, then artists producing street art effectively break through the ideological constraints of the global capitalist culture, and are acting in opposition to these ideological constraints despite the saturation of capitalism in the family, the state, and contemporary academia. Street artists use of relatively small scale forms of production allow them to be producers of culture without costly equipment, therefore making it possible to exist outside the bureaucratic and capitalist systems of the fine art world. In addition, because their art is placed in public, is not removable, and for the most part is created illegally, the artists forfeit any rights or ownership to their products.

As Gidra said in his interview, once a work is put on a wall the artist has no control of what happens to that work and even has no rights or ownership over the image or text. In the creation of street art these artists are rejecting the role of consumer and taking on the role of producer. In addition, what they are producing has no monetary value. To produce something that has no monetary value rejects the capitalistic binary of consumer and producer. The act itself is a political rejection of the dominant economic system that is quickly consuming the globe.

Stencil artist TKV reflects on the value of her work,

You're doing something that is not for money. You are doing it just for it, just to go out there and think. That is the most valuable thing I have, street art and it has no value! I mean sometimes it all feels like it is all in your head, but it isn't. The next day your artwork can be crossed over or a bust, so it doesn't exist anymore, okay so it exists, on the internet or something, but that is only virtual. Your street art isn't something you can grab.<sup>31</sup>

In a follow up conversation with TKV she spoke of how sometimes she works on commissioned pieces, doing wall murals for pay. She has some qualms about this but qualified it with the logic that it pays much better than washing dishes and other low paying jobs. The paid paint jobs allow

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<sup>30</sup> Louis Althusser. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

her to go out and do her own work at night. She also explained how her commissioned jobs are typically just decorative and rarely contain any personal or political meaning.

Gidra admitted that sometimes he takes money for his work, but he admitted this with a sort of qualifier that it is not his main motivation:

I make money with my tools (paint jobs) and I take money but I just want to make some place better. You know when you cross the street and you see something and it makes some emotion in you and it (the emotion) passes through you? That is nice and that is why I do it and I see that place better with some drawing and I like it and if you don't like it then you can cross it or you can go on.<sup>32</sup>

Leon, who works in Hip-Hop style graffiti, says he never takes money for paint jobs. However, he asks those who commission pieces to buy the paints that he needs. Leon sustains his paint supply by telling his commissioners that a piece will require two or three times the amount of spray paint than it actually does. "They don't know how much paint it takes", Leon told me in our interview. In asking for more paint than needed, Leon ensured that he continues his own projects on the side. While this could be read as some sort of capitalistic corruption, Leon's sole job is painting. When he showed me his apartment, which is a room on the top floor of an apartment building, a room probably not meant for occupancy, he explained that he didn't need a lot space, just a place to sleep and keep his paints. It was clear that Leon's motivations for painting was far from capitalistic gains.

The art itself sometimes speaks of this rejection of capitalism. Two images come to mind. The first is the image of a head eating dollar signs. The second is TKV's piece of a women chained to a shopping cart which she created in response to the opening of a new mall in Belgrade. She views her work as a sign. She says,

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<sup>32</sup>Personal interview with Gidra conducted by Emily Levitt on 14 April 2009.

You don't have to be part of this extreme materialism that happened here, everywhere. Here it is two things: you have this consumption to buy buy buy and on the other hand you have people who don't have money for anything, just what they need for today and tomorrow. There is this illusion that you are doing something when you are buying things.<sup>33</sup>

The imagery itself challenges the viewer more directly to think about his or her own roles in consumer culture.



The image above shows an anonymous man inhaling or eating money. It seems to be a critique of the assumption that only necessary substance we need to survive is money. In addition, the passage the money would take, if it were to be “eaten” or “inhaled” by the figure is painted neon yellow, a color often associated with toxins. Perhaps the artist is suggesting that the money is the toxin or the poison that figure is about to digest. Money seems to be associated with a false sense of subsistence.

### **Anonymous Interactions**

Once placed on a public wall, the imagery and text of graffiti artist from all backgrounds is placed into the hands of the public. Any individual is free to alter, cover, or add to street art. For many individuals working in the streets, this interactive aspect gives their work some collaborative or a communal nature. It is often evidence that other individuals are noticing,

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<sup>33</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

enjoying, or at least getting something, an emotion or reaction, from the work the artist left on the wall. Stencil artist TKV told me, “I really like when you do something and they draw a mustache on it. That’s great, its interaction with someone you don’t know, it is communicating through art and I really like that. It means that somebody is paying attention to your work and that’s good, that’s great.”<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein graffiti artist Leon said, “when I make a piece I always try to imagine where they are going to fit the penis. If it is a figure it is obvious, but I always wonder where they’ll put it. I mean I love that, when people add the penis, even if it is because they don’t like it they are at least interacting with it.”<sup>35</sup> Leon and TKV appreciate this kind of interaction with their art.

While Leon and TKV enjoy and notice the minor additions to their pieces, those who engage in the writing of political text have more political motivation to write over or engage with other political messages. The crossing out, overlapping, and adding represents the same sort of debate that is happening in politics itself. In the image below there in blue is the Obraz symbol. In red behind the Obraz stencil it reads, “SKOJ, secure jobs”, a socialist message that if Serbia returned to communism or socialism there would be jobs for everyone. This graffiti is on the Faculty of Philosophy on Studentski Trg. There is wall space on the building that has no graffiti; therefore it is clear that the Obraz symbol was placed over the communist writing initially.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Personal interview with Leon conducted by Emily Levitt on 16 April, 2009.



For other graffiti artists, the crossing over or covering of pieces is considered a sign of disrespect. In addition, it is about style or what is considered “good” or “bad” graffiti. Graffiti artist Gidra is part of the graffiti crew E++. They have been painting in Belgrade for a long period and have earned much of the respect of those who consider themselves first generation graffiti artists, however, they still are meet with some resistance by hip-hop style graffiti writers. Gidra said,

The last situation we had we painted a mural and everyone liked it. The old people from the building came out and gave us cookies and juices and everything was nice. But the kids from the building didn't like it because it wasn't hip-hop graffiti and so they crossed our mural, which was pretty large piece, something like 15 meters long. It was a big cat and she was playing and they just crossed it. I didn't know why. They wanted to do some Wu Tang graffiti over it. But I don't care, it is their building and if they don't want it they can cross it. Once I put something on the wall that is not mine anymore.<sup>36</sup>

Gidra's comment represents several aspects of graffiti culture. It is clear, first of all, that different graffiti artists often have different intentions. Second he introduces the idea of losing ownership over his art once placing it on a wall. This separates his motivations from the motivations of

<sup>36</sup> Personal interview with Gidra conducted by Emily Levitt on 14 April 2009.

other artists, who have the opportunity to claim ownership of their pieces and control their destination or display. Rather street artists know from the on-set they have no control after finishing the piece.

### **Gender Divides in Subculture**

While Graffiti exists outside the mainstream and often critiques mainstream culture, certain social norms still saturate the social codes of conduct. In Nancy Macdonald's book The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York, she addresses the use of graffiti in New York and London to legitimize masculine roles and the difficulty of women entering into the graffiti culture. Female graffiti writers face unique difficulties. Macdonald writes, "The female writer's task is a difficult one. Male writers work to prove they are 'men', but female writers must work to prove they are not 'women'."<sup>37</sup> While Macdonald's work is focused in the late 1990s in New York and London, certain parallels exist today in Belgrade.

In my interview with TKV she explained how when she was first recognized as a prominent stencil artist "people didn't believe me, people were like, is this a boy?"<sup>38</sup>. She explained how in Belgrade women do "street art" and men do "graffiti". For her, this divide is also between who works with stencils and who does free hand graffiti. TKV currently is attempting free-hand graffiti for the first time. When I asked her about the gendered divide she told me

It is not forced into that but you can get that feeling. But I think I am breaking through, because, you see a difference in the way they (men artists) act towards you, now that I am working free hand. It

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<sup>37</sup> Nancy Macdonald *The Graffiti Subculture : Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. Pg.130

<sup>38</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

is because they think that graffiti and street art are two separate things... well they're not.<sup>39</sup>

When I asked TKV about how she transitioned into free hand she told me she had been dating a graffiti artist who worked free hand and he showed her a few tricks. Macdonald touches on such dating relationships as a barrier for women who get into free hand graffiti through their significant others. Macdonald writes, "Before a girl even starts, her expression of fidelity and dedication is tainted by the factor that often inspires her interest in graffiti – her male writer boyfriend. All three female writers reference a boy as their initial incentive"<sup>40</sup>. While TKV originally began creating stencils on her own accord before her relationship with her boyfriend, it is clear that in this male dominated subculture it is men who create the standards and set the definitions for success rather than women.

Interestingly enough, the production of street art outside of hip hop style graffiti in Belgrade is dominated by young women. Writer Jasmina Tesanovic created in 2007 a short documentary about stencil artists in Belgrade. In her documentary film she interviewed only women and highlighted their dominant role in stencil making. When I contacted her for an interview she was living in Italy. I asked her "What do you remember seeing on the walls most frequently? What did those images/words make you think about?" She responded, "I see feminine street art and it makes me understand how many sensitive young girls like my daughter live invisible in this city dominated by male aggressiveness."<sup>41</sup> The feminine street art Tesanovic is referring to include the feminine figures and the re-appropriation of famous female figures by artist TKV.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Macdonald *The Graffiti Subculture : Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. Pg. 134

<sup>41</sup> Personal interview with Jasmina Tesanovic conducted by Emily Levitt on 11 April 2009.

By re-appropriating images such as that of Virginia Wolf, TKV re-inserts the history of women figures into a public space that is dominated by the male historical figure. In our interview TKV told me “it is a way to honor them, they really influenced me so it wanted to say a thank you.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, in some ways TKV is also reshaping the history that is available to the public. While the walls have historical reminders of the riots of 1968, the battle of Kosovo from 1389, they also have reminders of historical women, all equally accessible on the street walls.

### **Creating a Colorful City: Motivations for Painting in the Urban City Space**

A common motivation between Hip-Hop style graffiti artists and stencil artists is their motivation to create beauty in their city. Many of the artists who work in the streets also work on individual projects that aren't public pieces. Therefore, choosing to put something in a public space is a choice that many think of as a gift to the city and the public. After speaking with several street artists it became clear that all of them found their government and the politics of Serbia frustrating and even oppressive. However, each of them said they wanted to stay in Belgrade, maybe travel, but ultimately return to the city they call home. It is clear from this desire to stay and live in Belgrade that these young artists have a profound attachment and investment in the city. Therefore, their motivations for creating street art stem from a love for the city rather than a hatred or dislike that is often associated with vandalism.

One of my interviewees, Rade, used to paint graffiti, however he no longer does so for various reasons. Yet, for him graffiti still carries a positive message:

There is one good thing that about graffiti, many of the old buildings that are ruined the graffiti painters are making them look beautiful and I think they have a positive vibe all the time...overall graffiti is positive and they are carrying an emotion from the

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<sup>42</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

common people and I think they deserve the attention. I can't say I always think "oh what a mess" when I see graffiti, no I see the bit of paint on the wall and the paint for me is something that is gorgeous. Sometimes when I see a few lines on the wall it is beautiful because you have a color on the gray building in the center of the city.<sup>43</sup>

Rade's perception of graffiti as a positive aspect of the city is exactly the message most graffiti artists want to send. The city of Belgrade is still rebuilding an infrastructure that for almost a decade received no care or attention because all extra funds had been diverted towards war. The endeavor to brighten up a city with graffiti may seem illogical, however, the government has little means to create and follow through with any sort of official beatification projects. In speaking with one graffiti artist he mentioned multiple times how no funds existed for cultural activities or projects in the state budget. Therefore, graffiti artists in some ways were filling a cultural gap in Belgrade. Even just adding the bit of color to the walls seems to transform a street into a lively space that encourages citizens to interact with their city on a new level.

Many artists are well aware of the specific locations where they work. They choose locations based on different criteria. Some artists, like hip-hop style graffiti painter Leon, only paints in legal places because he believes a lot of kids are destroying the city with meaningless graffiti. As an older graffiti writer he wants to set high standards and have good intentions with his pieces. Therefore, he paints in what is considered legal places in order to encourage other writers to write, paint, or draw, while thinking critically about where and why they draw there.

Gidra of E++ speaks of his own criteria for where he paints,

I pick buildings based on architecture and maybe I choose some place where you don't expect to find a drawing or maybe were people go to take a pee or something. I usually pick some trash place, not new buildings because they are cleaning those all the

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<sup>43</sup> Personal interview with Rade conducted by Emily Levitt on 20 March 2009.

time. I like just old buildings or some industrial part of the city. Places that seem boring place.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear that Gidra chooses places based on their lack of beauty. He describes his paintings as unexpected encounters, as if to surprise someone wandering through the alleys. Many street artists spoke of this ‘element of surprise’ and likened it to a gift. TKV spoke of how some people walk the same path everyday She said, “imagine one day there is something new, that could change your whole day or just create new thoughts”<sup>45</sup>. Many artists create their pieces as little presents hidden in the less common spaces of the city. It is clear the pieces then aren’t for glory, fame or the spreading of their name but rather for the people who interact with this spaces, which is most likely going to be locals or people who are already living in these locations.

Gidra spoke of how street art can function like a gift for ordinary people, he said,

Ordinary people who were passing those pieces liked the pieces. They were asking who did it, actually. That was nice because we inspired some good emotions in the people and that’s what they need. They just need to relax.<sup>46</sup>

Gidra’s specification of “ordinary people” reveals whom street art is intended to inspire. It is not created for art gallery curators or people who hold power, such as politicians or athletes, but for the people who live in the gray buildings and are walking the same routes everyday. Artists TKV expands on this notion of positive emotional exchange through her art. She said,

I believe in art for change. You do your art, you change something. It is not always exact, because you don’t know what you are changing...but because when you do something on the street it is not yours anymore. It has its own life on the street. You just let it go there and you don’t know what effect it will have on people who see it and pass by it or what they will think about it. Like what will be triggered in their thoughts or brain or what emotions will be triggered or wont. I believe every action you take has consequences and sometimes I like to think of my work as some kind of compass.

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<sup>44</sup> Personal interview with Gidra conducted by Emily Levitt on 14 March 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Gidra conducted by Emily Levitt on 14 March 2009.

I think it is important for good energy. It is important for people who do it and for people who look at it.<sup>47</sup>

It is clear that graffiti artists view themselves as contributing to the city and the environment in general. They do not view their work as vandalism or as destroying the city but rather a positive gift to the city and the people who live in Belgrade.

### **An Alternative to Drugs and Politics**

According to many Belgrade youth, the use of drugs in the city is highly prevalent. Many young people turn to selling drugs in order to make money or gain power amongst peers. In a conversation with the graffiti artist D, he spoke of how there are no opportunities for young people to make money, be creative, or even express themselves in any creative way<sup>48</sup>. He explained how his friends who got into graffiti stayed out of selling drugs, which many of his peers began doing as teenagers. In addition, many individuals expressed that graffiti and street art offered an alternative to joining a sports club or getting involved in politics. A common feeling in Belgrade is that in order to get a job or be successful you must belong to and be involved with a political party. In one conversation with a young man he expressed how his parents are more concerned with when he will join a political party than when he will get married or get a job. Perhaps in their mind the last two will materialize after joining a political party. TKV said that one goal of her art is to prove there is an alternative to politics or sports club, that one create their own lifestyle in Belgrade. She said, "I think about my art as a sign of how you can do it differently. You can do it differently, you don't have to end up in prison or

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<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview with D conducted by Emily Levitt on

dead or being consumers.”<sup>49</sup> She expands this idea and how the greater political situation in Serbia effects younger generations today. She says,

I can understand why the young population is into crime or drugs. It is because you don't have a chance to grow who you are really, to grow your talents your hopes, whatever you want to be. You don't get that opportunity. Well you do, but you have to struggle really, really hard. Here I think it is more a state of mind that sometimes we end up being in. You feel hopeless, like you cant do anything and you just think 'how am I going to get money?'.<sup>50</sup>

There is a prevalent idea that the only way to survive in the new capitalistic, post-war Serbia is through personal connections, corruption, and crime. In one interview with a student Marko expressed this lack of opportunities. He said,

Billions of kids are being born into the world in which the first and only thing they are being told is that nothing is theirs. It is very hard to explain to a new born baby that nothing belongs to him or her, that everything is somebody else's and that you need to kill, cheat and do whatever to grab a piece of it because it is not yours

<sup>51</sup>

Marko's perspective is most likely shaped by his experience in Serbia, where corruption and politics offer some of the only routes to success, power, and wealth. In choosing not to participate in these worlds but rather to participate in a subculture, individual artists are creating alternatives to the dominant narrative for success.

However, the act of painting graffiti or doing stencil art is most of the time (unless done on a legal surface) an illegal act. In participating in an illegal act one could condemn street artists as individuals or groups who are attempting to as Marko says, take something that is not theirs. That something is the street. However, many artists are adding to the streets not in order to claim them for themselves but to give the streets back to the everyday citizens who live, work, and call

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<sup>49</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Personal interview with Marko conducted by Emily Levitt on 15 March, 2009

Belgrade home. In a conversation with TKV we spoke of the next site where she wants to put her work.

The site is a city owned public garden, a location TKV doesn't usually attempt to create pieces on. According to TKV, however the gardens are falling apart and are not kept in good condition. The garden does not add anything to the community. The garden is as an example of how the government and the city do not care for or are not invested in creating a beautiful city. TKV explains that the upkeep of public spaces is normal for a European City. The designation and neglecting of these spaces keep Belgrade from entering the ranks of what TKV considers culturally Europe. TKV is doing her piece in the garden in order to give the garden value and meaning for the community, something the city has failed to provide despite that it is a city owned property.<sup>52</sup>

### **Conclusions: Re-Imagining Numbers**

When I first walked through Belgrade the street art seemed to crawl across every wall. However, the street art has now transformed into the walls themselves. The images and words no longer seem added on to a wall but they seem like they are the walls. It is almost as if one were to remove the street art from Belgrade, the buildings themselves would not be able to remain standing. This is because the graffiti and street art have become so integrated into my image of the city that it is nearly impossible to imagine Belgrade without its graffiti and street art. Yet, what is possible is the disappearance of street art in Belgrade in the city center in the next decade. As Serbia moves toward European Union integration and increases its attempts to attract tourists and stabilize economically, efforts to clean the city of graffiti will become stronger. Interestingly enough it is the graffiti and street artists who truly are invested in the future of

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<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April 2009.

Belgrade. Each artist I spoke with, after divulging of their negative views of Serbia, they proceeded to speak of their plans to stay in Belgrade in the future. TKV said,

Well I would love [to stay in Belgrade] because I want to invest in my own city and country because I am from here. I want to travel and I want to go study somewhere but in the end, I would love to make changes here because in your country, or your city, you are already at some level and when you go somewhere you have to start from scratch. I think you can have more influence in your home, and I want to finish this... I know how this town breathes. I know every street, when and what is happening, it is my territory.<sup>53</sup>

Other graffiti artists spoke of similar feelings. They had plans of traveling, but ultimately they all wanted to return to their city. By working in the streets these individuals are demonstrating an investment in the city they live in. While many young people leave Belgrade today, these young artists are remaining in Belgrade and creating a new form of art in order to contribute to their communities. Even those who are not interested in beauty but political messages are still engaging with their city in a level many young people reject. Taking initiative and being expressive of their views reveals a level of political and social engagement that is lacking in many places and social groups. There is a conversation and dialogue occurring on the street, therefore this younger generation is moving away from silence acceptance and inaction. These artists literally engage with their physical city in order to transform their everyday lives into their ideal conception of contemporary Belgrade.

In their efforts to change their everyday lives they providing examples of the power an individual can use despite their background and or lack of resources. These artists use tools available to every individual to create changes in culture and possibly shape ideological perspectives, despite their lack of access to mega-power structures such as political systems, government, and media. In many ways they stand as evidence that individuals maintain the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

power to be a producer of culture and maintain the power to shift, alter, and control everyday life despite the contemporary emphasis on global power structures, such as global corporations, the capitalist system, and political machines.

As Belgrade continues to transform itself in the next decade, its path will be determined by the actions of individuals. While street artists represent a small minority, there are other groups who are working to create positive change in Belgrade and who create avenues for dissident voices, alternative voices, and new conceptions of culture. Some may doubt the impact of such small groups of individuals, however, it is possible to re-imagine these minorities in a way that makes possible real change. There is the opportunity to transform these small percentages of individuals into international movements working for cultural alternatives. When you think about the minority voices regionally or internationally and you create a network between these voices, then the a movement becomes great enough to impact mega-power structures. In my conversation with Marko, he phrased his perspective on alternative voices in this way:

We are building a network of losers. There is a small percent of people who see the possibility of changing the situation. It is always 5% versus 95%. But, if you network the 3 percent from here with the 5 percent from there, then your whole sense of your position appears differently. All of a sudden there is hope and there is optimism. It is the discovery that the numbers can change<sup>54</sup>

There are small pockets of change emerging in different aspects of society and in different parts of the globe. As these pockets grow and bridges are built between them it is possible to make the vision of change a reality. Already street artists in Belgrade are collaborating with artists from Zagreb, Prague, Germany, the UK and Amsterdam. Through their art they are creating networks of socially engaged artists and individuals. They are intertwining the stories and fates of different

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<sup>54</sup> Personal interview with Marko conducted by Emily Levitt on 15 March, 2009

cities. In a way they are re-imagining the number. If we re-imagine the numbers, the city, and the individual's ability to create, then small acts, such as those of street artists, carry great potential for social change.

### **Limitations of Research**

A major limitation of my research was my inability to speak with the individuals who are responsible for writing political texts. This is in part due to the anonymous nature of the work and also to my limited time available to make research contacts. In addition, my own background and contacts in the region shaped with whom I was able to speak with and had access to for interviews. Because my contacts in Belgrade were established through people who identify with the dissident voices of Belgrade, my contacts tended to identify as dissident voices as well. My access to those who identified with the dominant ideologies, such as nationalism, was limited.

My position as an outsider, while helpful in gaining me interviews, also limited my ability to read and interpret graffiti from an insider perspective. Often times I had to rely on translations and the assistance of others to interpret political symbols I found on the city walls. In some cases, some political messages I may have passed did not catch my attention due to my limited knowledge of Serbian language and Cyrillic script.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Looking at street art from the perspectives of the creators gave appropriate insight into their motivations and visions for their art, however, taking on a similar project from the perspective of an average citizen could provide an entirely different perspective. I would recommend a project that looks at the perception of graffiti from outside of this minority culture.

In doing so, one could understand how effective the street art is in propagating the intended messages and how influential it is on the everyday person.

## Appendix

### Interview Guide:

*Do you like the place where you live?*

*Do you work as a collective or individual?*

*Can you describe the work you do as an artist?*

*What is the most recent project you have done?*

*Can you tell me the story of when you first worked in the public?*

*How long have you been creating works such as what you do now?*

*How were you introduced in the ideas of working in the public sphere?*

*Why do you perform or create art in public streets?*

*After experiencing working in public sphere how do you think of you art differently?*

*Is the primary goal of your art political action? Social commentary? Or pure aesthetics?*

*If you are still working in the public sphere, how has your strategy or content evolved?*

*What inspires your work?*

*Do you consider yourself an activist?*

*Do you consider your work political?*

*Is work specific to living in Belgrade? If so, how?*

*How do you imagine the impact of your work done in the public?*

*Do you have plans for any future projects?*

*Is there anything you would like to add?*

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**List of Interviews**

Personal Interview with Anja conducted by Emily Levitt on 10 March, 2009.

Personal Interview with D conducted by Emily Levitt on 16 April 2009.

Personal Interview with Gidra conducted by Emily Levitt on 14 April 2009.

Personal Interview with Jasmina Tesanovic conducted by Emily Levitt on 11 April 2009.

Personal Interview with Leon conducted by Emily Levitt on 16 April, 2009.

Personal Interview with Marko conducted by Emily Levitt on 15 March, 2009.

Personal interview with Rade conducted by Emily Levitt on 20 March 2009.

Personal interview with TKV conducted by Emily Levitt on 12 April, 2009.