

INTRODUCTION

Since the appearance of graffiti culture in Philadelphia and New York at the end of 1960s, this visual expression has attracted attention of researchers, both in positive and negative light. One branch (criminology, sociology, and psychology) was often discussing the root causes of the “delinquent” behaviour while other (art history, cultural studies, and subculture studies) was finding fascination in activities, strategies, and visual language that has not been seen before. In this edition of *Kultura* journal we will follow the second branch in present day research. It is important to note that dominant academic discourse related to this topic is no longer trying to situate graffiti culture within the wide field of traditional graffiti, rather trying to establish an independent approach which prioritizes and validates graffiti culture and other visual expressions that stem from it. For more than 50 years this field of artistic expression has been developing, so today we can talk about graffiti culture, street art, new muralism (neomuralism) and some less known, but still important branches such as calligraffiti.

The general confusion when we talk about graffiti culture comes from the term graffiti itself. The original meaning of the word was coined at the end of 19th century by the researchers who wanted to distinguish between the official and unofficial messages on the archeological site of Pompeii.¹ After that all unsanctioned messages in public spaces were grouped in the same category.² However, it is very hard to relate the early latrinalia research and contemporary graffiti culture research. That endeavour becomes even more problematic after the emergence of street art movement and new muralism that became the dominant field of research in 2000s.³ In order to demonstrate huge potential in the field of graffiti culture and related visual expressions in Serbian context, this edition of *Kultura* journal will outline the research conducted in our cultural setting so far.

It is interesting to note that Yugoslav and later Serbian academic audiences were interested in the graffiti culture phenomenon already in the 1980s. But as it was the case elsewhere in the world, there was a strong attempt to give legitimacy to graffiti culture, and interventions that we will recognize later as street art, through the connection with other types of graffiti and art in the streets. So it is not always clear when these early researchers write about graffiti and street art do they mean political or subcultural messages, street theater, or basking. But it is worth mentioning that the journal *Quorum*,

1 Kimvall, J. (2014) *The G Word: Virtuosity and Violation, Negotiating and Transforming Graffiti*, Stockholm: Dokument Press, p. 18.

2 Radošević, Lj. (2013) *Graffiti, Street Art, Urban Art: Terminological Problems and Generic Properties*, New Cultural Capitals: Urban Pop Cultures in Focus, editor L. Koos, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 1–13.

3 Bengtson, P. (2014) *The Street Art World*, Lund: Almendros de Granada Press.

published in Zagreb in 1988 already had translations of the most important publications that were relevant for graffiti culture.⁴ Another extraordinary example is *Književna kritika*, published in Belgrade in 1990, where we can find articles by Ratko Božović and Čedomir Vasić, as well as translations from the “graffiti Bible” *Subway Art* and Norman Mailer’s cult introduction to the book *The Faith of Graffiti*.⁵

By sharing mostly unpublished research on graffiti and street art in Serbia in the past twenty years or so, our goal is twofold: to make these findings public and advocate for its relevance within academia. After defining the terminology, some key challenges, and historical development in the first part, in the second part of this issue we want to move the focus to producers themselves and their dynamic, self-organized and artist-run initiatives, such as festivals, projects, and graffiti jams. Analytical reflections are generally scarce, despite the continuous media attention in the past ten or so years and online presence in general. We mapped a number of relevant case studies, some historical and others contemporary, in an attempt to contribute to future research.

Before diving into case studies, another definition is necessary—that of new muralism (neomuralism). Generally speaking, a mural is any painting on architecture, positioned whether inside or outside the building (see Danilović’s article). Additionally, in graffiti culture, a mural is also a larger, complex piece (see dictionary in Appendix 1). The major political and formal change in the XX century was Mexican muralism (muralismo), introduced in the 1920s after the Mexican revolution. Unlike traditional murals, Mexican artists introduced socially and politically charged themes in public settings, often extending the murals’ reach beyond closed spaces. While government and community based muralismo has its own history and development in the Americas, its potentials have been recognized worldwide.

Several changes occurred with the arrival of graffiti in the 1970s and development of street art in the 1980s in the US and Europe, which distinguished this new muralism from its predecessors starting from the 1990s. The process occurred in Serbia with various city festivals including graffiti and street art from the early 2000s. Technically, traditional mural painting was fused with a variety of graffiti and street art techniques and materials, including spray cans, stencils, paste-ups, etc. Authors are now a mix of graffiti writers, street and fine art artists. Content-wise, new muralism relies on popular and accessible imagery, similar to street art, and aims at the widest possible audience. New muralism initiatives are by rule operating on an institutional level with permissions, which changed the nature of production of both graffiti and street art. First, the legal aspect has enabled artists to invest more time and even create much larger pieces than they could if working without permits. Second, these initiatives became closely interlinked with more or less official city policy, where they serve a variety of functions, including

4 Maković, Z. ed. (1988) *Quorum – časopis za književnost*, godina IV, br. 1 (18), Zagreb, pp. 194–274.

5 Hamović, Z. ed. (1990) *Književna kritika*, tematski broj – Grafiti – *Čitanje zida*, br. 2 (mart i april), Beograd.

urban regeneration, beautification, defense of public commons, tourism, cultural industries, gentrification, among others. This can potentially discourage more spontaneous, or sometimes explicitly political or agonistic themes, yet sometimes there are artworks that manage to tackle socially aware topics like the ecological mural *Tree eater* by Blu from 2008 or Jana's Converse City Forests mural on gender equality from 2021.

Having all the terminological and visual complexities of graffiti culture, street art and new muralism in mind, we bring you research that we hope will shed a new light on these visual expressions. Still, this research field is largely untapped and the potential is huge. Therefore, we encourage you to start from the basics, which will hopefully relieve some confusion and give you the opportunity to become familiar with the visual language and some historical facts which are included in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this Introduction.

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Appendix 1

GRAFFITI DICTIONARY⁶

The following is a selection of common terms and expressions from the New York slang which became a standard in graffiti culture worldwide.⁷

All city – this means the writers are “up” (active, see below), but the title is awarded only to the best writers whose graffiti have the widest reach.

Background – technical solution to make a piece more noticeable if the background is covered with tags.

Back to back – a whole wall covered with pieces, but could also refer to throw-ups covering each other.

Bite – copying another writer's style.

Blockbuster – large, rectangular letters, usually two-colored and tilted.

BMT – NYC subway line, operated by Ridgy and Ding Dong trains (see below).

Bomb – intensive tagging or painting, also meaning to cover a given territory with tags or throw-ups (in Serbian, “bomba”).

Bombing – going to paint (in Serbian, “bombardovanje”).

⁶ From: Radošević, Lj. (2005) *Istorijsko-teorijska rasprava o pojavi i razvoju grafita u Beogradu od 1996. do 2005. godine*, diplomski rad (MA thesis), Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu, pp. 64-68.

⁷ See: Chad, S. (n.d.) *The Words: The Official Graffiti Glossary*, 03. July 2024, <https://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>; Chalfant, H. and Cooper, M. (1984) *Subway Art*, London: Thames & Hudson.

Bubble letters – type of traditional letters used for throw-ups due to their rounded shape which enables easier and quicker work.

Buff – initially the chemical removal of graffiti from trains, now any removal of graffiti from any surfaces (in Serbian, “bafovanje”).

Burn – to beat the competition with one’s style, also a good piece which “burns” (prži).

Burner – originally a very good “wildstyle” piece (see below) usually underneath the train window and covering the whole car; today any piece with bold colors and fine style (in Serbian, “brner”).

Cap – spray nozzle, can be “fat” and “skinny”, i.e. releasing a wide or thin line (in Serbian, “kapica” for the cap, “fetčina” for the fat cap).

Character – a character appropriated from comic books, cartoons, video games, or popular culture in general (in Serbian, “karakter”).

Crew – organized group of writers; members usually mention their crew in three letters next to their own tags (in Serbian, “kru” or “ekipa”).

Cutting lines – writing technique used for the inside of letters and characters, allowing for thinner lines than the ones made with skinny caps.

Dis – short for “disrespect”, negative connotation.

Def – derivative from “death” and means something is really good.

Ding-dong – a type of subway cars, with flat surfaces made from stainless steel, named after the characteristic sound before the doors close; the trains were easy to get buffed so no one made any particularly good graffiti on them.

Dope – initially a hip-hop term, synonym for “cool”.

Down – to go in action with someone, or be a part of a crew.

Fame – recognition; a writer earns it only with continuous action and significant production (in Serbian, it corresponds to recognition).

Fanzine – a magazine usually run and dedicated to a particular group of enthusiasts; in graffiti culture, fanzines are usually dedicated to sharing photographs of graffiti, interviews with writers, etc.; the first graffiti fanzine was International Graffiti Times (1984-1994).

Flat – another type of a subway car, although today the expression can be applied to any flat surfaces.

Fly – cool.

Fresh – new, cool, great.

Getting up – expression used to mark the end of a successful and intensive writing or tagging of trains.

Going over – writing over or covering someone’s graffiti; other expressions are “X-ing out” or “crossing out”.

IRT – another NYC subway line which had flat cars.

Kill – intensive bombing.

Krylon – spray can brand.

Layup – open air train depot; alternatively a “yard”.

MTA – Metropolitan Transit Authority.

Mural – a large-scale and usually complex piece made across a whole wall.

Old school – term used to refer to the oldest graffiti period and production; in the US context, it usually covers the period from the mid-1970s to 1983 (in Serbian, “old skul” and “stara škola”).

Outline – first it referred to a sketch from writer’s “black book”, today a line around a piece (in Serbian, “autlajn”).

Panel piece – a piece underneath the train windows and between the doors; “window down” is used only for underneath the windows.

Piece – short from “masterpiece”; by rule of thumb any graffiti with minimum three colors (in Serbian, “pis”).

Piecebook – writer’s sketchbook, also known as “blackbook” or “writer’s bible”.

Ridgy – another subway car type, with wrinkled edges; this type was active in Brooklyn and usually covered with throw-ups.

Roll call – tagging one’s own crew members or everyone who helped paint a piece.

Rustoleum – spray can brand.

Scrub – another type of throw-up, filled quickly with zig-zag lines which remain visible.

Stickers – printed on adhesive paper, contains a writer’s tag, piece or character; a form of tagging.

Tag – the basic form of graffiti, writer’s stylized signature/logo done with a marker or spray; if someone’s tag is too long, it’s usually shortened.

Tagbanger – writers who only do tags.

Three D (3D) – three dimensional letters, first introduced by Phase 2; usually accompanying wildstyle pieces for more complex effects.

Throw-up – tag or part of a tag done in a simple and fast technique, usually bubble letters with an outline and swiftly filled interior; traditionally only with two colors, one for the outline and the other for filling (in Serbian, “troap”).

Top to bottom – a piece which covers the whole side of a subway car by height; “end to end” is used for covering the car by length; can also be used for a fully covered wall.

Toy – inexperienced or incompetent writer; usually used in a negative way.

Up – a writer who's very active and whose pieces can be spotted everywhere.

Wildstyle – a complex construction of letters with least amount of legibility; the hardest but also most desirable style for a piece in the early history of graffiti culture.

Whole car – combining “top to bottom” and “end to end”, covering a whole subway train car.

Whole train – used when the whole train composition is covered with graffiti.

Writer – a person who does graffiti.

Dictionary of Belgrade graffiti slang

Terms and expressions utilized by writers in general. Many have their own words referring to the NYC slang. All have been collected from interviews with Belgrade writers in the early 2000s.⁸

Baciti (to throw) – used in expressions such as “baciti pis” (throwing a piece) or “baciti bombu” (throwing a bomb), meaning to make graffiti.

Biti na... (to be at...) – used in expressions such as “biti na zidu” (to be at the wall) or “biti na troli” (to be at the trolley), meaning to be at the writing spot.

Crtati (drawing) – to paint graffiti; an important perceptual difference from the English “painting,” in line with “writing” and “writer”.

Ekipa – same as “crew”.

Otkinuti (to tear it up) – to make good graffiti.

Pregaziti (to step on) – to cross over another's graffiti, same as “going over”.

Produkcija (production) – same word is used in the NYC slang but in Serbia means a piece with significant financial investment; usually with a negative connotation.

Upeglati (to iron out) – to make a piece technically as perfect as possible.

Skinuti (take down/off) – to copy someone else's style, same as “bite”.

Skrnav (defiled) – bad graffiti.

Srebro (silver) – a synonym for “throw-up” done in silver paint; if done with precision and skill, but only in silver color, a whole piece could be called “srebro”; one of the characteristics of the early (old school) Belgrade style graffiti.

Zabosti (to score) – same as “baciti”.

⁸ See: Radošević, op. cit.

Appendix 2

HOPE

BELGRADE OLD SCHOOL⁹

In the mid 1980s Block 45 used to look like any other suburb of Belgrade. Besides being quite isolated from the city center, lacking infrastructure and at the proximity of the river Sava, this city block was unique in one other respect. Graffiti. This city block was and still is the Mecca of Belgrade's graffiti culture. Here, some of the first graffiti in Serbia were created.

- In the mid 1980s, the wave of hip-hop culture that swept Europe had strongly hit Block 45 as well.
- During that period the first crew that took on both graffiti and breakdancing was formed. The name of the crew was Fantastic Boys, but it was also known as the Rap City Crew, and its members were Babuš, Đela, Steva, Tića and others. Interesting fact is that in 1985, at the dance competition at the Sports center "11th April" in Belgrade, this crew lost in finals to the Đogani Fantastico crew, which became the leading group of dance-dizel¹⁰ scene in Serbia in the 1990s.
- One of the first graffiti this crew made was the character of an octopus on the bank of river Sava in Block 45 where they practiced breakdance, and where they slowly formed some type of a Hall of fame. Apart from this graffiti, in the neighborhood's kindergartens, they made RAP CITY and RCC, of which the former was untouched until 2007.



Figure 1: Fantastic Boys, *Rap City*, Block 62, Juri Gagarin boulevard, Belgrade, circa 1985 (photo: Ljiljana Radošević)

⁹ This short article is a recollection by writer HOPE on the pioneers of the Belgrade graffiti culture and the early scene from the mid-1980s to early 2000s. Originally published as: Hope (2009), *Stara škola Beograda / Old School of Belgrade*, Balkan Round, Issue #1, Belgrade, pp. 4-7. Edited and translated by Ljiljana Radošević.

¹⁰ Dizelaši was an urban, street, youth sub-culture popular in the 1990s, which enjoyed the mix of turbo-folk, hip-hop, and dance music.

- Inspired by Fantastic Boys, Jens made his first graffiti MIŠA in 1988 on the Sava bank, and as such became the graffiti writer with the longest history of writing¹¹ on the Serbian scene.
- Due to the country being in civil war and severe crisis, graffiti writing almost completely disappeared from Serbia. Just here and there one could spot some of Jens' graffiti (who was still tagging as Miša).
- After a short visit to Paris, Jens came back to Serbia and decided to create the first graffiti crew in 1995, BMB (Biša Miša Bosić), with Biša and Bosić.



Figure 2: Jens, quai of river Sava in Block 45, Dr Ivana Ribara Street, Belgrade, 1997
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

Figure 3: Jens, vicinity of Terazije Square, Belgrade, 1998 (photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

- The same year they made a piece called STUFF where Miša did letters and Bosić made the alien with the joint. It could be argued that this piece initiated the Serbian scene because nothing like it existed before. The piece created euphoria that spread vastly and quickly and became a backdrop for the show Rap & Soul on TV Pink, as well as in the music videos of the groups Sunshine (for the song *America Preview*) and Maddogz (song *Freedom*), but also appeared on the covers on some hip-hop albums. That was ironic since Miša and his crew used to listen to techno and trance music at the time. Even six months after its creation one could see the groups of people that were either taking photos of the piece or just looking at it in awe. In other parts of the city some other graffiti were made, such as FUNK at the Branko's bridge and another one at the Mostar intersection by unknown authors.

¹¹ In Serbian, instead of painting graffiti we say drawing graffiti (crtati grafite).

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Figure 4: Jens and BMB Crew, *Stuff*, Block 45, Dr Ivana Ribara Street, Belgrade, 1995
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

Figure 5: Dr Qee, *Anger is a Gift*, Block 45, Lazaro Kardenas promenade, Belgrade, 1995
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

- At the same time, in Block 45, Dr. Qee (Dr. Kiza) started doing graffiti. He was best known for his interpretation of the famous character Bob Rock from popular Alan Ford comics with the slogan *Anger is a Gift*. But Kiza abruptly left graffiti culture.
- Cobesta28, better known as Cobes, started doing graffiti in the mid 1990s all over the blocks in New Belgrade but the first graffiti piece he made was in Novi Sad. At the beginning of 1997, by pure chance, he met Jens and two of them started tagging all over the city.
- The same year Cobes and Jens created their graffiti crew AGC (Anonimus Graffitikus Crew or the AG City), and actively started doing graffiti around Block 45. Those first graffiti were mostly silver pieces. Besides the two of them, who were the core of the crew, Mise, Sane 751, Krca, Jamas and Jole joined the crew later on.



Figure 6: Cobe, quai of river Sava in Block 45, Dr Ivana Ribara Street, Belgrade, 1998
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

Figure 7: AGC Crew, Block 45, Dr Ivana Ribara Street, Belgrade, 1998
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

- During that period, and a bit later, we started seeing some new crews and new tags such as Bougie, Soter (90210 Crew); Sub Zero, Negre and Abs (Halley Zone Crew); Dr Leco, Vsa, Fuz (SCWAD Crew or SCD); Sholim, Sale, Da Gambia, Vuiche (Chemical Crew); Leo' (CO2 Crew); Face, Mask, Demon, Chef Sale AK and Shorty.



Figure 8: Bougie, Punk, underground passage in Bulevar oslobođenja, Belgrade, 1999 (photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

Figure 9: CO2 Crew, Pavilion Cvijeta Zuzorić, Mali Kalemegdan, Belgrade, 2000 (photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

- In 1997 Cobes, Bougie, Face and Soter made first pieces on the trains.
- At the beginning of 1998 AGC crew was disassembled because it became too large and it was impossible to keep track of its members. Despite that, the scene was still unified.
- The first graffiti jam in Belgrade was organized in 1999.¹² It was hosted by the primary school Kralj Petar in the city center.¹³ Local participants were Jens, Mise, Cobes, Sane 751, Face, Mask, Sub Zero, Abs, Negre, Shorty, Chef Sale AK and Dr Leco. There were also international participants Jen and Fuk from Croatia and Rok and Goražd from Slovenia.

12 The organizer was the civil association PostPesimisti, backed by the Open Society Fund, which through SANE 751 reached out to Belgrade writers and invited them to the festival. There were almost twenty writers in total coming from Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia.

13 Twenty years later, in 2019, as a part of the Rekonstrukcija festival, Paint Kartel collective organized a tribute jam. It was a way to remember one of the most important events in Belgrade's early graffiti history. They hosted some of the graffiti writers who participated in the first jam and some that are important for the local scene now. Graffiti writers and street artists who participated are the following: Negre, Sub Zero, Nikola Kori, Marz, Das Drogen Crew, Sensi, Audrey, Rule, Japon (Spain), Easy, Akira, Deroks, Weedzor, Piros, Rage, Skirl (Austria), Mosk (Croatia). Year earlier, in 2018 in Višnjiceva street, Paint Kartel together with Street Smart, organized the event *Warm up: United Colors of Belgrade*, as a form of preparation for the big tribute in 2019. See: Anonim. (29. August 2019) Festival umetnosti na ulici Rekonstrukcija 2019, *Dan u Beogradu*, 20. December 2024, <https://www.danubeogradu.rs/2019/08/festival-umetnosti-na-ulici-rekonstrukcija-2019/>

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Figure 10: Gips and ABS, Primary school Kralj Petar I, Kralja Petra Street, Belgrade, 1999
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).



Figure 11: Mise, System Explosive, Primary school Kralj Petar I, Kralja Petra Street, Belgrade, 1999 (photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

- Until 1999, painters mostly used Kenda Kolor and Cosmos spray cans. The same year new spray cans entered the local market, namely, Kim-Tec, a Polish brand that had good pressure, had a rich color palette and it was quite affordable. At the time the price of these spray cans was 10RSD (today 0.30 Euro), while the other spray cans cost around 170RSD. At the same time caps¹⁴ became available on our market and combination of these factors significantly raised the quality of the local scene.
- After the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 many crews were disassembled and many writers, for their own reasons, became less active or stopped doing graffiti altogether.



Figure 12: Halley's Crew, Astronauts, Block 45, Dr Ivana Ribara Street, Belgrade, 1999
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).



Figure 13: Halley's Crew, Halleyz, Block 45, Dr Ivana Ribara Street, Belgrade, 2002
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

¹⁴ Spray nozzles used to control the flow of paint.

- At the beginning of 2000 Asem (Koma), Serbian writer who resided in Cologne, Germany, wanted to help promote the local scene and offered Belgrade's writers to pay for the internet domain. Those graffiti writers that were still active formed the unified scene and together they created the crew BG Illegal (Sub Zero, Bougie, Cobes, Negre, Abs, Dr Leco, Necone, Angel, Dulait). The same year we see the rise in the number of new graffiti writers that consequently formed new crews.
- BG Illegal was disassembled after a year and a half but Cobes and Bougie, who left first, formed the new crew AFO (Antifašistička omladina), that is still active today. Other members of BG Illegal were active for a bit longer until they stopped doing graffiti all together. This marked the end of Belgrade's old school graffiti and its style took a completely new direction.



Figure 14: AFO Crew, Ceger, Dulait and Imun, Radnička Street, Belgrade, 2000
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).

Figure 15: AFO Crew, railway at Bulevar Vojvode Mišića, Belgrade, 2000
(photo: Ljiljana Radošević).