

Jolana Miličičová

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Prag, Bohemia

# BEYOND AESTHETICS: ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS WITH MURALS IN BELGRADE

DOI 10.5937/kultura2485103M

УДК 75.052(497.11)

316.7:39

Оригиналан научни рад

Датум пријема: 08. 04. 2024.

Датум прихватања: 08. 07. 2024.

**Abstract:** *The streets of Belgrade are filled with all kinds of street (art) interventions, including murals. In this article I argue that murals are not merely a means for artistic expression or beautification of urban space. While approaching murals from an ecological perspective, that goes beyond their aesthetic and visual aspects, I show that murals are complex entities that not only manage to communicate with each other and take on new meanings over time, but they are also intertwined with the “ecosystem” of the capital and Serbian society. Based on ethnographic encounters with two Belgrade murals, I trace the post-socialist transformation of both Serbian and ex-Yugoslav society, and the way people here deal with shifting temporalities.*

**Key words:** *Murals, Ecology, Yugoslavia, Urban space, Serbia, Post-socialist transformation*

Walking through the streets of Serbia’s capital, Belgrade, it seems as if you come across a street (art) intervention almost at every turn.<sup>1</sup> Or at least that was my impression when I started a research for my master thesis *Ecology of Walls: Ethnography of Belgrade Murals*, which was defended in 2023 at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, and on the findings of which this article is based.<sup>2</sup> And indeed thousands of writings, tags, graffiti and street art pieces, stencils and murals

1 The research was supported by the specific university research project 260736 Crisis and Uncertainty of Contemporary Worlds: Anthropological Perspectives, conducted at Charles University, Faculty of Humanities. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6978-0825>.

2 Miličičová, J. (2023) *Ekologie zdi: Etnografie bělehradských murálů*, master thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/181537> (accessed 02. July 2024). In case of interest in the English version of the master thesis, please contact the author at [milicicovaj@gmail.com](mailto:milicicovaj@gmail.com).

inhabit the walls of Belgrade's streets. As city dwellers though we can tend to overlook them. If it captures our attention we often see it in just two ways: vandalism or aesthetic beautification of urban space. We rarely look further at the richness of life that flourishes on the surrounding facades. To some extent the same can be told about social scientists. Slovenian researcher Mitja Velikonja has recently pointed out that street interventions – despite being an important part of public space all over the world – are rarely considered a legitimate topic for social scientific research.<sup>3</sup>

Along with it there is no consensus that would clearly and uniformly differentiate what is street art, graffiti or a mural.<sup>4</sup> Through literature, it is possible to come across many (sometimes contradictory) definitions of what street (art) interventions are and what forms of them can be distinguished. When I started my research, some of the first questions I began to ask myself in the field were: what exactly is a mural, how is such an image on a wall perceived by people inhabiting a given urban space along with it, and what can it in turn tell us about a given society and place.

*I really think that what a mural is depends on a context. (...) A mural doesn't exist without a context. If you go out of the context, you just get a painting. And a painting works in the vacuum of a gallery. On the other hand, a mural has to respond to its immediate spatial context. It's created in a temporal context, it's created in a certain political environment, in a particular social environment. (...) You can't see it as an isolated image. Because otherwise you take away everything that really makes it what it is.<sup>5</sup>*

This is how a muralist Jana Danilović described her perception of what a mural is when we sat together in a café in Vračar, one of the districts of Belgrade, and discussed the variety of forms that a mural can take. And, as I try to show in this article, not only a mural can not be viewed without its immediate and wider context, nor can it be approached as a mere static image on a wall.

In this article, I go beyond the aesthetic aspect of murals. (1) First I introduce two researched Belgrade murals, (2) then I explain how, with a help of ecological perspective, I – in my ethnographic approach – view murals as complex entities with their own socio-material life and agency and (3) finally on the case of the two murals I show how this approach allows me to study not only the lives of the murals, but also post-socialist transformation and reflections of lives of the people in the region.

3 Velikonja, M. (2020) *Post-Socialist political graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, London and New York, Routledge, p. XIII

4 Bengtsen, P. (2014) *The Street Art World*, Lund, Almqvist & Wikander Press, pp. 11-25; Schacter, R. (2016) Street art is a period, *PERIOD: or, classificatory confusion and intermural art, Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, edited by Avramidis, K., Tsilimponidi, M., New York: Routledge, pp. 103-118.

5 Miličičová, J. (2022) *Interview with muralist Jana Danilović*, personal interview, Belgrade.

### *Meet the murals*

In Rajičeva Street in Belgrade you can find a building of the Belgrade Faculty of Fine Arts (FLU) and, opposite the faculty, a building of the former Jugobanka. And it is on the side wall of this building where a mural is painted in bright colors. This mural is one of the oldest in Belgrade. It was created here in 1984 by professor from FLU, Čedomir Vasić, with his then-students Perica Donkov, Darija Kačić, Vesna (Milivojević) Knežević, Mirko Ognjanović and Igor Štepančić.

Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of people pass by the mural every day. But if you don't know about it, you might pass it unnoticed. Despite its monumentality, the mural is a bit hidden in the folds of the street. The houses here don't form a straight line. This creates a small plaza that reveals a view of the side wall of the former Jugobanka, with the mural facing directly onto the famous Knez Mihailova Street.

Two central elements dominate the mural. A young man with his back turned to people walking on the street, so he does not properly show his face, and streams of spilled paint that seem to flow down from the top of the building. The young man is wearing a denim jacket, jeans and sneakers. He holds a large orange sketchbook in the armpit of one hand and his other hand is casually tucked in his pocket. Like this, he is looking somewhere upwards.



Figure 1: Mural “Rajičeva,” Čedomir Vasić & students, Belgrade, 2023 (photo: author)

On the other side of the city, in Bežanijska Kosa district, you can find a mural that resembles the one from the 1980s. The mural is called *Promena boja*, which means *Transformation of colors*. It was created 36 years after the first of the murals, by a muralist Pijanista as part of a Runway Festival. The surroundings in which this mural is located are different from the bustling city center. Bežanijska Kosa has a more residential atmosphere. The mural inhabits one of the corner walls of a block of apartment buildings. In front of the mural is a small grassy area, a pavement and a small parking lot. On the mural we see an elderly gentleman with a white beard. He is wearing a hat, a dark shirt and trousers and an unbuttoned greenish shirt. This man is facing people walking on the street. With one hand in his right pocket, his left hand pointing upwards, his eyes follow this gesture. From the roof does not stream paint, as in the first mural, but something brown. Something the artist himself referred to as feces during our interview in 2022.



Figure 2: “Mural *Promena boja*,” Pijanista, Belgrade, 2023 (photo: author)

As part of my field work research in Belgrade, I participated in many events related to the local art community. There I gained new information and contacts. I began to realize that the mural on Rajičeva Street and the mural on Bežanije Kosa are related at a conference where I first met Pijanista – the author of the second mural I researched. From his presentation it became clear that the mural *Promena boja* not only pays homage to the one on Rajičeva Street, but also tries to reflect a perception of a certain transformation.

Soon after this meeting, I began to ask myself various questions: how and in what circumstances murals come to life? What does the transformation of colors embody and what is it trying to tell us? With whom the murals communicate? And can messages of the murals gain complexity when they interact with one another?

### *Anthropological journey to the life of murals*

The core of the anthropological approach is qualitative, or more specifically ethnographic research. Its main focus is on participant observation. The principle of this method involves being in the field for a long-term period of time, immersing oneself in the local environment, spending time with local people and researching the chosen phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach opens up the possibility to study in depth, for example, those contexts Jana mentions at the beginning of this article. As a researcher, I spent a total of approximately 6 months in Belgrade over the course of two years (2021 and 2022).

There is a rich body of literature that addresses the meanings that murals represent.<sup>7</sup> However my aim during the research was not to look at the murals ‚only‘ from their artistic and meaning-making side. Instead, or rather alongside, I have tried to think of them holistically. As an intersection of actions and events involving walls and facades, artists and passers-by, local moods and global politics. The metaphor of the *ecology of walls* helped me to do this. Thanks to it, I was able to view the murals as a kind of *living organisms* that are embedded in a certain socio-material environment, and thus closely intertwined with the *ecosystem* of the capital and Serbian society. In this ecological approach, I build on the concepts of Gregory Bateson's *ecology of mind* and Tim Ingold's *ecology of materials*.<sup>8</sup>

In its broadest sense, ecology is about the relationality of all organisms coexisting and interacting in a particular physical environment, together forming specific ecosystems.<sup>9</sup> Bateson argues that if we want to understand a phenomenon, we need to view it in a

6 Madden, R. (2010) *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, London, SAGE Publications, pp. 77-94.

7 See for example: Danilović, A. (2017) *Grad i slika: Značaj i funkcija slikarskih intervencija u javnom prostoru*, PhD thesis, Fakultet primenjenih umetnosti program Primenjena umetnost i dizajn, Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu; Goalwin, G. (2013) The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland's Political Murals, 1979-1998, *International Journal of Politics, Culture* no 26(3), Published online: Springer Science+Business Media New York, pp. 189-215; Rolston, B., Ospina, S. (2017) Picturing Peace: Murals and Memory in Colombia, *Race and Class* no 58(3), Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE, pp. 23-45; Upalevski, I. (2017) Murals make (Our) history: paintings on the wall as media of cultural memory. Interpreting the current state of Warsaw's commemorative murals, *Przegląd Socjologii Jakosciowej* no 13(4), Published online: University of Lodz, pp. 114-135.

8 Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind*, San Francisco, Chandler Pub. Co; Ingold, T. (2012) Toward an Ecology of Materials, *Annual Review of Anthropology* no 41, Published online: Annual Review, pp. 427-442.

9 Pimm, S. L., Smith R. L., „Ecology“, Encyclopedia Britannica, May 2, 2024, June 4, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/ecology>.

context of the interconnectedness of a given (eco)system – with all the related contexts and relationships in which it is embedded.<sup>10</sup> Ingold criticizes the asymmetrical view on human and non-human actors. From his perspective, artifacts – such as murals I would add – are seen as too passive and dependent on human agency. In his view, we should rather view them like living organisms, as something that develops, grows and is an active part of the process of becoming.<sup>11</sup>

Following this, I base my research on the assumption that murals, like any other organisms, are part of the environment that affects them, just as they affect it. By environment here, I mean all the surrounding entities and conditions affecting a given organism. From air, water or other organisms – for example, other murals – to the various cultural and social forces shaping all forms of life in a given environment.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand the phenomenon of murals, I am, with Bateson, trying to understand the *circuit* of which murals are a part and which they allow to enter.<sup>13</sup>

The very nature of qualitative research required narrowing the focus to a few selected murals.<sup>14</sup> Initially, I wandered around the city and observed the variety of what Belgrade's walls had to offer. Gradually five murals crystallized that I began to examine more closely, two of which I present in this article. Each of the studied murals demonstrated an ability to embody and reflect significant topics resonating in contemporary Serbian society. Whether it was air quality, gender equality, nationalism or the process of post-socialist transformation.<sup>15</sup>

I subsequently created detailed field notes from the days spent in the local streets and with the local people. Alongside this, I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with street artists, graffiti writers or muralists, experts with particular knowledge tied to particular murals, or people who were just passing by the murals.<sup>16</sup> Those appearing in this article are presented here either under anonymous names or under their artistic or civic names. Depending on our agreement in terms of written or verbal “ethnographic” consent.<sup>17</sup> Using the strategies and tools of qualitative analysis, I then attempted to view these data in some new and (anthropologically) relevant ways.<sup>18</sup>

10 Bateson, op. cit, pp. 287-312.

11 Ingold, op. cit, pp. 427-442.

12 Lock, M. (2020) “Permeable Bodies and Environmental Delineation”, *Biosocial Worlds: Anthropology of Health Environments Beyond Determinism*, edited by Seeberg, J., Roepstorff, A., Meiner, L., London: UCL Press, pp. 15-43.

13 Bateson, op. cit, pp. 229-232.

14 Flick, U. (2007) *Designing qualitative research*, London, SAGE, pp. 61-67.

15 Miličičová, op. cit.

16 Madden, R. (2010) *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, London, SAGE Publications, pp. 59-76.

17 Fassin, D. (2009) Nad rámec etických pravidel: Zamyšlení nad etnografickým výzkumem praktik zdravotní péče v Jižní Africe, *Biograf* no 49, Published online: Časopis Biograf, pp. 25-41.

18 Gibbs, G. R. (2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London, SAGE, pp. 143-145; Konopásek, Z. (1997) Co si počít s počítačem v kvalitativním výzkumu, *Biograf* no 12, Published online: Časopis Biograf, par. 106.

### *Murals and transformation(s)*

The mural in Rajičeva Street is closely related to the history of the boom of murals in Belgrade in general. Although it was not the first mural to inhabit the walls of this city, it had an ambition to be the protagonist and the start of an initiative aimed at finding new ways to contribute to the positive (urban) transformation of Belgrade. It was Professor Vasić and his students from the Faculty of Fine Arts (FLU) who were one of the most active initiators of creating murals in Belgrade between 1984 and 1997.<sup>19</sup> And many contemporary muralists and murals more or less directly follow this tradition.<sup>20</sup>

As Professor Vasić revealed to me, his idea was that murals would become part of Belgrade's urban planning: *„It was about the need for something to move, something to change in the environment as it was then. And it seemed to me that murals were a means that could contribute to that.“* With his students, he therefore created a plan for 50 murals, along with a list of suitable locations which the murals could inhabit, and submitted it to the city council. The mural in Rajičeva Street was the first of this initiative. Based on a sketch by Perica Donkov. According to the professor, the mural had no other purpose at that time. Perhaps only that:

*...one could say that one enters the city through Kalemegdan [nearby park and fortress] And this could have been a symbol that the city had some other ambitions than just buildings, but also some life. Some kind of artistic life that starts with this building.<sup>21</sup>*

According to Vasić, with this mural and with the initiative murals slowly began to enter the consciousness of the local population and the city's leadership. And how it seems based on the research, the mural has developed for itself also a new purpose with passing time and interaction with another mural – the mural *Promena boja*.

There are three things to mention about the *Promena boja* mural in this context. (1) Its author, Pijanista, is known for his critical perspective on the current conditions in Serbia. His works tend to be filled with criticism, irony and a certain amount of provocation. (2) The young man in the 1980s mural and the older gentleman in the 2020 mural are the same person. In fact, one of the students who worked on the first mural, and later also a professor, Mirko Ognjanović, stood as a model for both of the murals. (3) The *Promena boja* mural, according to Pijanista, consciously refers to the Rajičeva Street mural created in the 1980s – i.e. in the time of Yugoslavia.

Most of the people I spoke to were unaware of this linkage. Including those living in Bežanijska Kosa. For example, when I approached an elderly lady with her granddaughter while wandering around the block, she said she knew nothing about the mural,

19 More on the history of murals in Belgrade: Stojanović, S., Miletić, M., & Radovanović, M. (n.d.) *Istorijat oslikavanja murala u Beogradu*, March 12, 2023, <https://www.udruzenjekurs.org/radovi/istorijat-oslikavanja-murala-u-beogradu/>.

20 Miličićová, op.cit, pp. 79-86.

21 Miličićová, J. (2022) *Interview with professor Čedomir Vasić*, personal interview, Belgrade.

“for example, who is this person anyway” with an undertone that suggested in my eyes a question: “and why do we have him here at all.”

Ability to transmit information can sometimes tend to be viewed through a filter of logocentrism, reducing it to a spoken word or written text.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the power of what the murals are trying to tell us may be overlooked. Some murals may be openly activist.<sup>23</sup> However, as the intertwined lives of these two murals will show, sometimes a seemingly subtle message becomes visible only through communication of two murals at once.

Pijanista himself describes the relation between these two murals as follows: the man from the *Promena boja* mural is no longer a student, but a professor, and a lot has changed. And not only in the young man's life:

*I wanted to show what has changed in society. And in fact, nothing has changed except the colors. And here [in Serbia], when we say colors, in the jargon we most often refer to parties in a socio-political sense.*<sup>24</sup>

However, according to Pijanista, where used to be bright colors, feces, represented by brown streams, are now pouring down from the top:

*Which is also a connotation of the fact that when one thinks of those who are currently in power, dictator or whatever, one says, 'At the top.' (...) So you could say that feces are pouring down from above, and that is the only transformation that is really happening here.*<sup>25</sup>

When I talked to local people about the relationship between the two murals, I did not want to influence them with my already acquired knowledge and interpretations. That is why I always gave them a photo of each of the murals separately without any additional notes. People usually recognized the mural in Rajičeva Street. It was often referred to as their favorite mural or figured in their memories of their childhood. In contrast, the *Promena boja* mural was unknown to most of them. However, from the very beginning, most of them, as soon as they saw the two photographs side by side, began to suspect that the murals depicted one and the same person.

22 Koháková Haakenstad, M. (2015) Vizualita národní identity v Mexiku: Odras kolektivní paměti, či mocenského diskursu? *Lidé města* no 17(1), Published online: Fakulta humanitních studií Univerzity Karlovy, pp. 3-44.

23 Tunić, S. Grafiti u pokretu, December 13, 2019, June 4, 2024, <http://www.seecult.org/vest/grafiti-u-pokretu>; Stammen, L. and Meissner, M. (2022) Social movements' transformative climate change communication : extinction rebellion's activism, *Social movement studies* no 23(1), Published online: Taylor and Francis, pp. 1-20.

24 Miličičová, J. (2022) *Interview with muralist Pijanista*, personal interview, Belgrade.

25 Ibid.



Many of the informants assumed that the young man in the first mural is looking towards a better future. At the *Promena boja* mural some of them suggested that the man was pointing out that the roof was leaking or that he might be turning to God with his troubles. These reflections are nicely illustrated by an example from a discussion over photographs of the two murals during focus group interview, in which Marko and Petar, students at the University of Belgrade, and Suzana and Jovana, two assistants at the University of Belgrade, participated.<sup>26</sup>

Petar: *He's holding something [the man on the mural on Rajičeva Street], maybe holding some books, maybe some work, I don't know, and looking at the sky. And the man is facing the future. Eternity. And he is looking upwards. But other than that, I don't know what to say... Well, he [the person on the Promena boja mural] is pointing to something. Is he pointing to the fact that it's leaking from the roof?*

[Everybody's laughing]

Suzana: *Well, it really looks like it. Literally, that's what it looks like!*  
(...)

Jovana: *I have a very similar feeling as Petar about this [the mural in Rajičeva Street]. A glimpse into the future. These intense colors remind me of some brightness, something beautiful that has yet to happen. Something that awaits us. And this person here seems to me to be one promising young man who is absolutely ready to embark on what lies ahead. Maybe he's just out of school, and those colors are what's coming. Absolutely some glimpse towards some of the beauty of the life that is ahead of him. And as for this guy [the Promena boja mural], it makes a lot of sense that maybe he's pointing to some work that needs to be done on that building. But if I consider that maybe he's looking up to the sky, maybe he's addressing God. Maybe he's even turning to God [develops a reflection thoughtfully], maybe he's thinking about life. And the look on his face is kind of sad. Kind of melancholic, like, 'God, why'. It's like he's wondering why something is happening in his life. So let's put it this way, maybe he's turning to God. Maybe he's asking for something. I find that expression very strange. I can't quite define it. But I would say he's not entirely happy...<sup>27</sup>*

After a while, when Marko and Suzana also comment, I reveal that the same person is depicted on the mural 36 years apart. Or rather Petar precedes me with his assumption.

Suzana: *That's more or less what we were talking about. He was expecting some super shiny future here and he got a leaky roof – just kidding. He got some kind of disaster. This is such*

26 Hyde, A., Howlett, E., Brady, D. and Drennan, J. (2005) The focus group method: Insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents, *Social Science & Medicine* no 61, Published online: Elsevier, pp. 2588-2599.

27 Miličičová, J. (2022) *Focus group interview with two students, Petar and Marko, and two assistants at University of Belgrade, Suzana and Jovana, Belgrade.*

*a classic Balkan story, a classic Serbian story. We keep looking forward, expecting some beautiful future and instead we grow old in a disaster. In wars, in despair, in some abnormal situations, sanctions and so on. So now the murals are even better for me. And I like the fact that he's addressing us. Communicating directly with us and sending that message: hey guys, it's a disaster here, move out [laughing]. I'm kidding...<sup>28</sup>*

As curator Slavko Šterk writes, graffiti can “entertain, provoke and stir thought.”<sup>29</sup> And the same can be said of murals. Conversations with local people and thinking about and with the murals led me to conclude that the murals together seem to reflect a more general mood in the country. Like Marko, Petar, Suzana and Jovana, most of the informants perceived the age of the man in the second mural as an embodiment of the passed time. The change of colors, then, was most often seen either as a change in conditions in artistic circles or as a change for the worse in the life of the depicted person or in the current situation in Serbia in general.

Among the people in Serbia, both the older and the younger ones, there is a certain degree of shared nostalgic narrative relating to the period of the former Yugoslavia, Yugo-nostalgia.<sup>30</sup> The murals themselves seem to make these discourses present in their lives – the bright colors illuminating the future for Yugoslavia and the swamp of fecal matter of the current conditions in Serbia.

Velikonja in his research on political graffiti throughout the space of the former Yugoslavia, speaks of the fact that of hundreds of photographic materials of street interventions related to the former Yugoslavia collected in his archive, there are five times more pro-Yugoslav than anti-Yugoslav ones.<sup>31</sup> In most cases, these are various writings or images referring to Yugoslavia or its important figures or symbols. Velikonja then subjects the collected data to a semiotic analysis, taking Barthes, Eco or Foucault as his guides. But what to do if the message the street (art) intervention tells is not explicit at a first glance? Or it is even located somewhere in the space between two murals. As in the case of the Rajičeva Street mural and the *Promena boja* mural. In other words, how to get beyond the surface of the ‘obvious’ meanings? This is where I take an ecological perspective to help me, as it allows me to trace the interconnected lives of these two murals and the *circuit* which they are part of.<sup>32</sup>

28 Ibid.

29 Šterk, S. (2004) *Umjetnost ulice – Zagrebački grafiti 1994–2004/Street Art – Zagreb Graffiti 1994–2004*, Zagreb, Muzej grada Zagreba, p. 69. Quoted from: Velikonja, M. (2020) *Post-Socialist political graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, London and New York, Routledge, p. 5.

30 Bošković, A. (2013) Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: Lexicon of Yu Mythology, *Slavic Review* no 72 (1), Published online: Cambridge University Press, pp. 54-78; Volčić, Z. (2007) Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* no 24(1), Published online: Taylor and Francis, pp. 21-38.

31 Velikonja, op. cit, pp. 69-77.

32 Bateson, op. cit, pp. 229-232.

*On stuckness, nostalgia and hope*

As has already been said, the *Pomena boja* mural suggests that the time when the mural in Rajičeva Street was created, the time of Yugoslavia, refers to something better than what people in Serbia are experiencing today. One of my informants, Novak, a photographer documenting art on streets who himself experienced the Yugoslav era, drew my attention to a well-known opinion poll that suggests that currently about 70 % of young Serbs do not see their future within Serbia and think they should move out of the country.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the Yugoslav period is seen as a period of relative economic stability, a time when people could travel freely and held one of the best passports in the world.<sup>34</sup> This was also intertwined with the fact that Yugoslavia enjoyed a recognised position on the geopolitical level at that point in time. Novak stated:

*For the West we were the East, for the East we were the West. And with that passport we could go to the Soviet Union and, on the other hand, to America. So from that side it was all very interesting. We also had enough money to follow some trends...*<sup>35</sup>

All this was largely due to the specific position of socialist Yugoslavia, which in many ways was very different from the experience of other socialist states in the Eastern Bloc.<sup>36</sup> As my colleague in the field, Ljiljana Radošević, once remarked during one of our walks, perhaps the most political element of the Rajičeva Street mural is the young man's Adidas-like sneakers and denim outfit. Such goods were not commonly available in other socialist states. To a certain extent, Yugoslavia owed these different conditions to the events of 1949, when Tito ideologically split with Stalin and thus Yugoslavia embarked on its specific form of socialism in opposition to the Stalinist Eastern Bloc.<sup>37</sup>

Since I was in the field as a half-Serbian, half-Czech researcher living in Prague, some of my older informants, such as a taxi driver Nebojša, mentioned school excursions to the Tatra Mountains or Prague in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Compared to the locals, they said, they

33 Mondo, Veliko istraživanje: Mladi bi da odu iz zemlje, April 11, 2019, April 15, 2023, <https://mondo.rs/Info/Drustvo/a1178961/Mladi-u-Srbijiistrazivanje-o-mladima-u-Srbiji.html>

34 Jansen, S. (2009) After the red passport: towards an anthropology of the everyday geopolitics of entrapment in the EU's 'immediate outside', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* no 15(4), Published online: Wiley, pp. 815-832.

35 Miličičová, J. (2022) Interview with photographer Novak, personal interview, Belgrade.

36 Vuletic, D. (2012) Sounds like America: Yugoslavia's Soft Power in Eastern Europe, in *Divided Dreamworlds?: The Culture Cold War in East and West*, edited by Romijn, P., Scott-Smith, G., Segal, J., Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 115-131; Zaccaria, B. (2014) The European Community and Yugoslavia in the Late Cold War Years, 1976-1989, *Disintegration and Integration in East-Central Europe: 1919 – Post-1989*, edited by Loth, W., Păun, N., Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, pp. 264-283.

37 Petrović, J. (2007) The Tito-Stalin Split: A Reassessment in Light of New Evidence, *Journal of cold war studies* no 9(2), Published online: The MIT Press, pp. 32-63.

38 More on the position of halfie anthropologists in: Miličičová, op. cit, pp. 22-24.

had the most modern clothes, could afford to spend money, and felt “like kings” in Czechoslovakia. However, as they all independently added in the same breath, “Today it’s the other way around.”

However, the 1980s, in which the first of the murals was created, was also a period of emerging economic crisis, as well as internal disunity within the Yugoslav federation.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, according to Novak, for example, in the early 1990s there was an assumption among people that Yugoslavia would be the first of the post-socialist countries to join the West. But then came the other events of the 1990s. This period is seen by many of the people I have had the opportunity to talk to as the moment when the problems that had been bubbling under the surface throughout Yugoslavia’s existence exploded.<sup>40</sup> Novak said:

*Everything that’s not supposed to happen to a young person happened to you. You had wars, sanctions, lack of everything, you couldn’t travel... and finally the bombing.*<sup>41</sup>

It was the moment when the *total collapse of everything* came and the moment when even the hope for a better future was lost. As Novak continues:

*The 1980s had that moment that had been going on since World War II – there was a belief and an idea that tomorrow will be better than yesterday. (...) And you had the ,80s with all the negative things... but you still had this idea that it was only temporary and tomorrow will be better. I think the ,90s destroyed all these thoughts that tomorrow will be better than yesterday in a short moment. And suddenly you knew tomorrow won’t be better.*<sup>42</sup>

Despite the end of the wars and the calming down of the situation in the region, the drop in enthusiasm and hope, according to some of my informants, continues.

Some authors, such as Hage, write about the need for *existential mobility*, about a need for a sense of moving on in life. And moving towards something that is better than what you are leaving behind.<sup>43</sup> However, the research of the lives of these murals and circuit which they are part of suggests that many people in Serbia perceive rather a feeling of a sort of *existential stuckness*. A sense that their lives are not moving *well enough* within the country.<sup>44</sup> This feeling was attributed by many of my informants to the continued stagnation and scandals that they felt surrounded the current Serbian government. On

39 Yarashevich, V. and Karneyeva, Y. (2013) Economic reasons for the break-up of Yugoslavia, *Communist and post-communist studies* no 46(2), Published online: University of California Press, pp. 263-273.

40 Fink-Hafner, D. (1995) The Disintegration of Yugoslavia, *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* no 37(3/4), Published online: Taylor & Francis, pp. 339-356.

41 Miličičová, Interview with photographer Novak.

42 Ibid.

43 Hage, G. (2009) *Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality, Waiting*, edited by Hage, G., Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, p. 99.

44 Ibid.

the other hand, according to many, there is no solid opposition in the country. During our interview, Pijanista himself mentioned that the colors on the older mural symbolize for him a certain happiness and life that “has been infused with color.” However, such a life, according to him, has been extinguished in Serbia with the new colors.

A feeling of such stuckness is often associated with the inability to move from the real or imagined place, as well as with waiting and a sense of wasted time: “To be stuck is both spatial and temporal.”<sup>45</sup> This may be why some young people in Serbia see a way out of this stuckness through physically leaving this (not only) geographical space. In the language of the researched murals, waiting for a future full of color has turned into a present full of feces. However, the perceptions that can be observed through the lives of these two murals in contemporary Serbian society are not exclusive to this country. Jansen, based on his research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, shows the contrast in the course of post-socialist transformation between some former Eastern Bloc states and some states of the former Yugoslavia. According to him, the people of former Eastern Bloc states, such as the Czech Republic, place the emic category of *normality* – as opposed to the *abnormal* socialist past – in a future embedded in a renewed belonging “to a universe referred to as Europe or the West.”<sup>46</sup> But as Jansen discusses, and as the two communicating murals suggest, people in the territory of the former Yugoslavia attribute this dreamed *normality* not only to an imagined future, but also to a past that is already gone. And this corresponds both to the nostalgic narrative surrounding the Yugoslav era and to the message pursued by the dialogue of the two murals. According to professor Vasić:

*There’s a lot of nostalgia for those days now. Firstly, because there was peace and because there was moving into something better. You could feel that things, the state, the people, were developing. (...) We had to go through the difficult, 90s. And in a sense they continue. I mean, somehow you don’t come back to the point where you feel that society is moving. Instead, there are always some breaks. Always forward and then back. And we start to be skeptical.*<sup>47</sup>

This nostalgia is embodied in reverse position by the mural *Promena boja*. As Pijanista told me:

*And in fact, the whole point is in the detail that, where there [on the Rajičeva Street mural] were colors, that it was some happier time. Seen from this distance. And that at this moment feces is pouring down. And that simply the situation is what it is. In society, in culture, among people.*<sup>48</sup>

45 Turner, S. (2022) “Camps as Vessels of Hope,” *Material Culture and (Forced) Migration: Materializing the Transient*, edited by Yi-Neumann, F., Lauser, A., Fuhse, A., & Bräunlein, P. J., London: UCL press, p. 58.

46 Jansen, S. (2015) *Yearnings in the Meantime: ‘Normal Lives’ and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*, New York, Berghahn, p. 36.

47 Miličičová, Interview with professor Čedomir Vasić.

48 Miličičová, Interview with muralist Pijanista.

At the same time, however, Pijanista added during our conversation that Yugoslavia itself does not mean that much to him, as he himself had not even been born yet in that time. Nevertheless, he found it a fitting comparison in the sense of a state that was better than the present one. For example, Novak's reflection was interesting. When we were discussing the two murals, he began to develop the idea that 'objectively' people are no worse off than in the 1980s. On the contrary, they are better off. What has changed is the perception of their situation. A very similar feeling is described by Jansen for Bosnia and Herzegovina: "...although I knew it (and they knew it), few acknowledged that most people in Dobrinja now had access to more and technologically more advanced goods than then. Yet most felt worse off."<sup>49</sup>

An important aspect that many of the informants referred to in their narratives about Yugoslavia was hope – represented in their eyes also in the bright colors of the older Rajičeva Street mural. Hope which is more difficult to find in the current circumstances. The post-socialist transformation is here intertwined with the post-war one. And the imagined future, in the eyes of many, never comes. Instead, as the *Promena boja* mural attempts to tell us, the country remains stuck in the "feces" of the current *meantime*, where many hopes seem to be disappointed again and again.<sup>50</sup> For many of my informants, the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003 was a clear moment when hope was lost. For some people in Serbia, Đinđić remains a symbol of "real" pro-European politics and the effort to emerge from the wounds and consequences of the 1990s. For many, the assassination is also a moment when figures who were active on the political scene in the 1990s are returning to power.

All of these motifs are reinforced by the interaction between the *Promena boja* mural and the Rajičeva Street mural. However, not all of those with whom I had the opportunity to discuss the murals completely agreed with the reflection of Pijanista. Especially people who had not experienced the '80s. For example psychologist, in her early 30s, Anja said to me:

*I don't see it that way. But I wasn't even born then. But I often have discussions with my mom about whether or not it was really a golden time. Definitely, when you look at everything that was in the country at that time, that time was great. But I think it was a pure loan. (...) And I think that now is the time when we're paying off that debt and living in sh\*tts [referring to Pijanista's comment about feces flowing down the wall] because they were living off what they themselves were creating and could create back then. (...) Yes. It was one rainbow. It was one idyllic color back then. But not because things worked, but because they took out one big loan that will be paid back by our generation and probably the generation after us. So in a way, yes. You have negative things that are more like fecal*

49 Jansen, S. (2014) On Not Moving Well Enough: Temporal Reasoning in Sarajevo Yearnings for "Normal Lives", *Current Anthropology* no 55, Published online: The University of Chicago Press, p. 77.

50 Jansen, S. (2015) *Yearnings in the Meantime*, p. 54.

*matter than what they used to be, but not because we're making any mistakes or because there's bad government policy now or anything like that. I think it's the result of bad policy that we've been dragging behind us for a long time. But I don't think that society as a whole, whether in Serbia or elsewhere in the world, has gotten that much worse.*<sup>51</sup>

Kole, a nearly 30-year-old architect, mentioned his belief that the vast majority of people who perceive the period of the former Yugoslavia with nostalgia also associate it with being young. Prof. Vasić eventually expressed similar opinion:

*So it means that it has one very strong message [the Promena boja mural]. That this whole system in which we did this [the Rajičeva Street mural] has failed. Which we know very well. We are aware that it has all collapsed, but what to do with it now. (...) Well, how shall I put it. The big socio-political conclusions are and are not... [hesitates] It was different. It was different. (...) Especially in these years. I've gone over 70 and I don't have much to look forward to anymore [laughs]. So, as I would say, I wouldn't totally jump to conclusions. Because biology influences them a lot.*<sup>52</sup>

#### *Mural: more than a painting on a wall*

The communication between murals in Rajičeva Street and the *Promena boja* mural embodies and reflects a certain perception of life in the given region. Miloš Moskovljević in his article on the (re)imagination of the past and collective memory through murals and graffiti, expresses his belief that "...murals and graffiti, should be observed as communal links between past and present."<sup>53</sup> And, I add, between the (imagined) future as well. Regardless of what does or does not influence the perspectives of the people living in Serbia on their lives, research on the Rajičeva Street mural and the *Promena boja* mural suggests that these two murals not only allow us a glimpse into the history of a given place and its people, but they also allow us a glimpse into how the local people deal with this history and how they reflect on their past, present, and just as importantly, on their future in relation to it. And at the same time, as I showed, the murals through their own lives, allow these perceptions to be rethought and reassessed.

In this article I go beyond aesthetic aspect of murals and with help of a metaphor of *ecology of walls* I approach the two presented murals as sort of *organisms*, which have their own socio-material life and agency and has the ability to interact and communicate with each other as well as to open up *circuits* which on different dimensions interconnect them with not only *ecosystem* of the capital city but also serbian society and ex-yugoslav region as a whole. To approach murals in this way allowed me to study not only the lives

51 Miličićová, J. (2022) Interview with psychologist Anja, personal interview, Belgrade.

52 Miličićová, Interview with professor Čedomir Vasić.

53 Moskovljevic, M. (2022) War on the Walls: (Re-)imagining Past And Collective Memories through Murals and Graffiti in post-Yugoslav Serbia, *UXUC - User Experience and Urban Creativity* no 4(1), Published online, p. 27.

of the murals and people who inhabit with them a given urban space but also post-socialistic and post-war transformations which Serbian society undergoes.

Not only these two murals, but countless other interventions on Belgrade's walls show that murals are not mere static images and platforms for aesthetic expression. As my research shows, murals have the ability to embody and sometimes be also active actors in issues that are for various reasons significant in contemporary Serbian society.<sup>54</sup> And Belgrade walls have become one of the places where these issues are infused and where they come to life.

#### REFERENCES:

- Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind*, San Francisco, Chandler Pub. Co.
- Bengtsen, P. (2014) *The Street Art World*, Lund, Almendros de Granada Press.
- Bošković, A. (2013) Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: Lexicon of Yu Mythology, *Slavic Review* no 72 (1), Published online: Cambridge University Press, pp. 54-78.
- Danilović, A. (2017) *Grad i slika: Značaj i funkcija slikarskih intervencija u javnom prostoru*, PhD thesis, Fakultet primenjenih umetnosti program Primenjena umetnost i dizajn, Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu.
- Fassin, D. (2009) Nad rámecek etických pravidel: Zamyšlení nad etnografickým výzkumem praktik zdravotní péče v Jižní Africe, *Biograf* no 49, Published online: Časopis Biograf, pp. 25-41.
- Fink-Hafner, D. (1995) The Disintegration of Yugoslavia, *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* no 37(3/4), Published online: Taylor and Francis, pp. 339-356.
- Flick, U. (2007) *Designing qualitative research*, London, SAGE.
- Gibbs, G. R. (2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London, SAGE.
- Goalwin, G. (2013) The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland's Political Murals, 1979-1998, *International Journal of Politics, Culture* no 26(3), Published online: Springer Science+Business Media New York, pp. 189-215.
- Hage, G. Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality, *Waiting*, edited by Hage, G. (2009), in Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, pp. 97-106.
- Hyde, A., Howlett, E., Brady, D. and Drennan, J. (2005) The focus group method: Insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents, *Social Science & Medicine* no 61, Published online: Elsevier, pp. 2588-2599.
- Ingold, T. (2012) Toward an Ecology of Materials, *Annual Review of Anthropology* no 41, Published online: Annual Review, pp. 427-442.
- Jansen, S. (2009) After the red passport: towards an anthropology of the everyday geopolitics of entrapment in the EU's 'immediate outside', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* no 15(4), Published online: Wiley, pp. 815-832.

<sup>54</sup> More in Miličičová, op. cit, pp. 121-124.



- Jansen, S. (2014) On Not Moving Well Enough: Temporal Reasoning in Sarajevo Yearnings for “Normal Lives”, *Current Anthropology* no 55, Published online: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 74-85.
- Jansen, S. (2015) *Yearnings in the Meantime: 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*, New York, Berghahn.
- Koháková Haakenstad, M. (2015) Vizualita národní identity v Mexiku: Odras kolektivní paměti, či mocenského diskursu? *Lidé města* no 17(1), Published online: Fakulta humanitních studií Univerzity Karlovy, pp. 3-44.
- Konopásek, Z. (1997) Co si počít s počítačem v kvalitativním výzkumu, *Biograf* no 12, Published online: Časopis Biograf, par. 106.
- Lock, M. (2020) “Permeable Bodies and Environmental Delineation”, *Biosocial Worlds: Anthropology of Health Environments Beyond Determinism*, edited by Seeberg, J., Roepstorff, A., Meinert, L., London: UCL Press, pp. 15-43.
- Madden, R. (2010) *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, London, SAGE Publications.
- Miličičová, J. (2023) *Ekologie zdí: Etnografie bělehradských murálů*, master thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/181537>.
- Moskovljevic, M. (2022) War on the Walls: (Re-)imagining Past And Collective Memories through Murals and Graffiti in post-Yugoslav Serbia, *UXUC - User Experience and Urban Creativity* no 4(1), Published online, pp. 23-40.
- Petrović, J. (2007) The Tito-Stalin Split: A Reassessment in Light of New Evidence, *Journal of cold war studies* no 9(2), Published online: The MIT Press, pp. 32-63.
- Rolston, B., Ospina, S. (2017) Picturing Peace: Murals and Memory in Colombia, *Race and Class* no 58(3), Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE, pp. 23-45.
- Schacter, R. (2016) Street art is a period, PERIOD: or, classificatory confusion and intermural art, in: *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, edited by Avramidis, K. and Tsilimpounidi, M., New York: Routledge, pp. 103-118.
- Stammen, L. and Meissner, M. (2022) Social movements' transformative climate change communication : extinction rebellion's activism, *Social movement studies* no 23(1), Published online: Taylor & Francis, pp. 1-20.
- Turner, S. (2022) “Camps as Vessels of Hope,” *Material Culture and (Forced) Migration: Materializing the Transient*, edited by Yi-Neumann, F., Lauser, A., Fuhse, A., Bräunlein, P. J, London: UCL press, pp. 53-67.
- Upalevski, I. (2017) Murals make (Our) history: paintings on the wall as media of cultural memory. Interpreting the current state of Warsaw's commemorative murals, *Przeгляд Socjologii Jakosciowej* no 13(4), Published online: University of Lodz, pp. 114-135.
- Velikonja, M. (2020) *Post-Socialist political graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, London and New York, Routledge.

- Volčić, Z. (2007) Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* no 24(1), Published online: Taylor & Francis, pp. 21-38.
- Vuletic, D. (2012) Sounds like America: Yugoslavia's Soft Power in Eastern Europe, in *Divided Dreamworlds?: The Culture Cold War in East and West*, edited by Romijn, P., Scott-Smith, G. and Segal, J., Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 115-131.
- Yarashevich, V. and Karneyeva, Y. (2013) Economic reasons for the break-up of Yugoslavia, *Communist and post-communist studies* no 46(2), Published online: University of California Press, pp. 263-273.
- Zaccaria, B. (2014) The European Community and Yugoslavia in the Late Cold War Years, 1976-1989, *Disintegration and Integration in East-Central Europe: 1919 – Post-1989*, edited by Loth, W. and Păun, N., Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, pp. 264-283.

*Internet resources and online newspaper articles:*

- Mondo, Veliko istraživanje: Mladi bi da odu iz zemlje, April 11, 2019, April 15, 2023, <https://mondo.rs/Info/Drustvo/a1178961/Mladi-u-Srbijiistrazivanje-o-mladima-u-Srbiji.html>
- Pimm, S. L., Smith R. L. „Ecology“ Encyclopedia Britannica, May 2, 2024, June 4, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/ecology>
- Stojanović, S., Miletić, M., & Radovanović, M., Istorijat oslikavanja murala u Beogradu, March 12, 2023, <https://www.udruzenjekurs.org/radovi/istorijat-oslikavanja-murala-u-beogradu/>
- Tunić, S. Grafiti u pokretu, December 13, 2019, June 4, 2024, <http://www.seecult.org/vest/grafiti-u-pokretu>
- Udruženje Kurs. Istorijat oslikavanja murala u Beogradu, No date, March 12, 2023, <https://www.udruzenjekurs.org/aktivnosti/istorijat-oslikavanja-murala-ubeogradu>

*Interviews:*

- Miličićová, J. (2022) *Focus group interview with two students, Petar and Marko, and two assistants at University of Belgrade, Suzana and Jovana*, Belgrade.
- Miličićová, J. (2022) *Interview with professor Čedomir Vasić*, personal interview, Belgrade.
- Miličićová, J. (2022) *Interview with muralist Jana Danilović*, personal interview, Belgrade.
- Miličićová, J. (2022) *Interview with photographer Novak*, personal interview, Belgrade.
- Miličićová, J. (2022) *Interview with muralist Pijanista*, personal interview, Belgrade.
- Miličićová, J. (2022) *Interview with psychologist Anja*, personal interview, Belgrade.

Јолана Миличичовá

Карлов универзитет, Факултет хуманистичких студија, Праг, Чешка

ИЗВАН ЕСТЕТИКЕ: ЕТНОГРАФСКИ СУСРЕТИ СА МУРАЛИМА  
У БЕОГРАДУ

**Сажетак:** Улице данашњег Београда испуњене су различитим врстама уличних (уметничких) интервенција, укључујући и мурале. Мурали нису само средство за уметничко изражавање или улепшавање урбаног простора. У овом тексту муралима се приступа из еколошке перспективе, која омогућава да се докаже да су то сложени ентитети који не само да могу да комуницирају једни са другима и с временом добијају нова значања, већ су и саставни део „еко-система“ престонице и српског друштва. На основу етнографских сусрета са два београдска мурала, у тексту је представљена постсоцијалистичка трансформација српског и бившег југословенског друштва и истражени начини на који људи у датом социокултурном и географском простору доживљавају промену различитих темпоралности.

**Кључне речи:** мурали, екологија, Југославија, урбани простор, Србија, историоцијалистичка трансформација