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THE ADVENTURES OF INSPECTOR YODA THE WRINKLED

NON-VIOLENT ACTIVISM AND QUEERING THE STREETS OF BELGRADE

DOI 10.5937/kultura2485081T

УДК 316.723:003.6.079(497.11)

Оригиналан научни рад

Датум пријема: 28. 04. 2024.

Датум прихватања: 07. 07. 2024.

Abstract: *Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled is an activist project which brought a distinct critical commentary and humor to the streets of Belgrade, Serbia, between 2014 and 2018. Inspector's work is closely interwoven with the LGBTQ+ history and street art interventions in the past two decades in Belgrade. Inspector playfully appropriated vernacular language, often subverting the meaning, and offering an important gender and social critique in the nationalistic and sometimes violent public space of Belgrade during the mid-2010s. It is paramount to look at these interventions as situational artworks which serve as tools of queer place-making and non-violent activism. The stenciled little pug could be interpreted as a sign of resistance and hope in an environment prone to desensitization to violence and general apathy.*

Key words: *Street art, Belgrade, 2010s, Activism, LGBTQ+, Humor*

Introduction¹

Imagine you are walking down a familiar street lined with charming but somewhat run-down pre-WWII buildings and more recent gray socialist blocks. You pass by cafes and parks, until you realize a dog is following you and even trying to address you as a passer-by. Every so often, you see a pug painted on the walls, with dozens of messages, such as *Izvini, nisi moj stereotip* (Sorry, you're not my stereotype), *Šta gledaš?*

1 Tunić, S. (2023) *The Adventures of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled: Queering the Streets of Belgrade*, MA thesis, Department of Art University of California, Davis, Department of Art History. An abbreviated and edited version was published in 2024, see: Tunić, S. (2024) *Queering the Urban Space: The Adventures of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled in Belgrade, Serbia*, SAUC – *Street Art & Urban Creativity Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Lisbon: Urban Creativity, pp. 72-89. This version was adapted to correspond with the issue's main themes.

(What are you looking at?), and *Diže mi se (rEVOLucija)* (I'm having a hard on [the rEVOLution]). The dog is Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled (Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani), an activist (from art + activism) project by Nikola Herman (Nikša), which also included his pug Yoda in creating a mysterious street art character. They² operated mainly throughout the streets of Belgrade, Serbia, between 2014 and 2018, and communicated almost 200 unique messages by using stenciled pugs with speech balloons, ranging from activist comments to everyday sayings. In these messages, Inspector playfully appropriated vernacular language, often subverting (or queering) the meaning, and thus offering an important social, gender and especially LGBTQ+ themes critique in an overtly nationalistic and sometimes violent public space during the mid-2010s.

Despite their significance, as well as notable presence and original style, Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled's opus has not been properly analyzed as a whole. Their work has been discussed in several interviews and newspaper articles, but analytical pieces are few and part of a wider discussion on Serbian street art, activist interventions in the city, or part of mapping social extremism. It is my goal to provide a more informed glimpse of their work, by offering more context and interweaving queer theory, visual analysis and social art history, in order to demonstrate how their activism is still relevant today.

Turning to Inspector is timely, and can be a means of supporting existing and future queer and activist movements in challenging this troubled sense of progress. This effort is also closely related to writing a responsible contemporary history of LGBTQ+ voices and experiences in Serbia which is often unstable, under threat of suppression or invisibility, and hard to grasp due to social, political, class, religious prejudices, and especially rightwing extremism.³ An additional sense of urgency is the fact that Inspector's stencils, as a form of street art which are often used for activism, are ephemeral in their core, and many pieces have already disappeared. Considering there has been no continuous production since 2018, their work is no longer in the public focus aside from occasional documentary exhibitions and street art aficionados' social media posts. This also brings to mind an issue that several authors have addressed: although popular, street art is often decontextualized with the overwhelming digital dissemination in the past ten or so years, often tied with the lack of direct contact with the lived environment. Therefore, I would like to propose a more experiential, embodied and grounded line of inquiry.

To avoid any possible confusion, I am using the word street art in a very narrow sense. Street art is a type of contemporary art made at the intersection of graffiti subculture and fine arts techniques, operating in public spaces. It is ephemeral, done both with and without permission, with larger communicative potential than graffiti since it employs

2 To avoid confusion, I am using *he* when referring to Nikša as an individual/author, and *they* when talking about the Inspector as a collaborative project which also includes Yoda the dog.

3 Blagojević, J. and Dimitrijević, O. (2014) Još uvek nismo kvir: tragovi prošlosti i/ili osmišljavanje budućnosti, *Među nama: Neispričane priče gej i lezbejskih života*, edited by Blagojević and Dimitrijević, Beograd: Hartefakt Fond, p. 9; Bilić, B. and Kajinić, S. (2016) LGBT Activist Politics and Intersectionality in Croatia and Serbia: An Introduction, *Intersectionality and LGBT Activist Politics*, edited by Bilić and Kajinić, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–29.

clear messages and/or characters.⁴ With its origin in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States and Europe, it quickly spread and became an international phenomenon in the 1990s, while in Serbia it has been present from the mid-2000s.

One of the most common techniques in street art is the use of stencils—template patterns one sprays or paints over to leave letters and images on the surface below. While the preparation could take some time, the execution in the street itself is rather quick, depending on the number of colors or layers the creator wants to utilize. Comprehension and direct messages are of the defining features of street art, and due to this very nature, stencils are commonly used for both artistic and activist ends.⁵ One of the key defining aspects of street art is ephemerality—the art is not made to last. The life of a given artwork in the street is dictated by the law of the street. Since a larger part of the production is made illegally (or without permit), it can be taken down anytime. Despite the political and community potential, intersections between street art and LGBTQ+ rights and creativity worldwide seem to exist in the margins, outside the mainstream.

Methodology

The intersection between street art, queer theory, and Serbia is rather a particular field. Street art has been well present in academia in the last twenty years with the internationally growing (and exploited) movement. Despite the ongoing gender analyses, however, discussions about queer street art seem to be in its infancy. There is very little mention of Serbia in the global street art world (and a rather small amount of in-depth analyses from the region), while queer theory is well received in the academic sphere. Combining the three areas, it is my aim to try to bridge this gap between the fields and advocate for interconnectedness of issues on a glocal (global + local) scale, by using Inspector's non-violent activism as a case study.

In approaching street art in general, I am echoing concerns by several researchers that street art needs to be approached in a contextualized and experiential way, especially in our era of overwhelming digitalization and popularization of street art.⁶ In following this advice, I rely generously on Mitja Velikonja's analytical framework which takes into consideration the message (content, artwork), the producer (artist), location (physical context) and reactions (public). This approach can provide the researcher a more rounded, informed and contextualized insight.⁷

4 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.

5 Waclawek, A. (2011) *Graffiti and Street Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, p. 33–36; Velikonja, M. (2020) *Post-Socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, London & New York: Routledge, p. 62.

6 Bengtson, P. (2014) *The Street Art World*, Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell Press, pp. 146–159; Lennon, J. (2021) *Conflict graffiti: from revolution to gentrification*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 19; Waclawek, op. cit, p. 61, 192; Velikonja, op. cit, p. 6.

7 Velikonja, op. cit, pp. 36–44, 87–130.

To achieve this inquiry, I implemented several methodological tools to contextualize Belgrade, collect the material, and demonstrate what makes public spaces really queer in Inspector's case. Embodied research methodology emphasizes physical presence of the researcher and temporality in constructing shared social meanings with other people involved in the study and embodied experiences.⁸ In this case, it includes my discussions with the artist and exploring the streets of Belgrade in person, both as a native speaker, guide, and a local. When it comes to the artworks, social semiotics is employed to understand social meanings and humor of Inspector's messages.⁹ This is supplemented by two interviews and several informal chats with the artist.

In collecting, selecting and analyzing the material, I relied on a mix of ethnographic, digital, and semiotic tools, to understand Inspector's choice of locations in a given space and viewers' potential encounter with them. These locations and Inspector's artworks were geocoded, mapped and grouped by relying on several digital photo archives,¹⁰ artist's social media (Facebook and Instagram),¹¹ and the use of Google maps. The latter was useful to see the wider street context and clusters of other artworks and messages nearby by way of Google's photographing Belgrade's street views in 2013 and 2014, during the Inspector's initial peak period of activity.

Another means of contextualization is to define queer in the local framework. Within the history of LGBTQ+ activism in Serbia, queer/kvir has often been employed strategically, as an innovative, self-reflective, politically charged and critical call for radical action.¹² One of the noteworthy critical appropriation examples of queer was QueerBeograd Cabaret from the latter half of 2000s. According to several researchers, the QueerBeograd collective playfully translated queer into *kvar* (malfunction), "pointing to a malfunction in hegemonic regimes, and queer politics as the politics of interconnectedness".¹³ Overall, their approach was relational and based on political solidarity, avoiding pigeonholing themselves on a single issue or exclusive gender and sexual identity issues.¹⁴

8 Fransberg, M., Myllylä, M. and Tolonen, J. (2021) Embodied graffiti and street art research, *Qualitative Research*, 0(0), p. 5.

9 Sørensen, M. J. (2016) *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17–26; Velikonja, op. cit, pp. 48–50.

10 Aside from my own collection, I relied on the material from the artist and from my street art colleagues Ljiljana Radošević and Aleksandar Đalek Đorđević, courtesy of Street Art Belgrade.

11 Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani's Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/inspektoryoda>; realnost_ujeda Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/reálnost_ujeda/.

12 See: Maljković, D. (2013) A lesson in queer (Interview with Federico Sicurella), 5. September 2013., 23. June 2024, <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Serbia/A-lesson-in-queer-141023>; Blagojević and Dimitrijević, op. cit; Petković, S. (2015) LGBT aktivizam u savremenoj Srbiji: politizacija identiteta i strategije LGBT aktivista, *Etnološko-antropološke sveske* 25, (n.s.) 14, pp. 52–56.

13 Marjanović, I. (2017) *Staging the Politics of Interconnectedness between Queer, Antifascism and No Borders Politics*, PhD dissertation, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, p. 4.

14 Marjanović, ibid, pp. 92–98, 238–246; Bilić, B. and Dioli, I. (2016) Queer Beograd Collective:

Having this intersectional perspective in mind, I argue that queer/kvar can be useful in interpreting Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled's creations. From 2014 to 2018, Inspector served as a proxy for Nikša in continuing the legacy and activism of past queer initiatives and collectives. Additionally, Nikša also queered the streets in Belgrade by communicating messages promoting queer relationally, a non-normative of sociality, that went beyond identity politics and included commentaries concerning established systems of power and exclusion (such as the trans community, people living with HIV, migrants, homophobia and hate speech).

Context

The key for understanding LGBTQ+ activism in Serbia, and previously SFR Yugoslavia, is feminism. "The women's movement in the territory of former Yugoslavia has a long history and it represents a crucial point in the struggles against the oppression of patriarchy, but it also overlaps with hidden histories of homosexuality."¹⁵ The "softer ideological cage" of orthodox socialism saw feminism as either unnecessary or a bourgeois concept, but the conference opened new perspectives and possibilities. Under the tenets of feminism, the first LGBTQ+ activist groups were formed in the 1980s.

Officially the first gay-lesbian organization in Serbia was Arkadija, formed in 1990, with the main aim to lobby against homophobia and decriminalize homosexuality (which occurred in 1994), among other goals. After the breakup of Yugoslavia due to the civil war in 1991, many feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations in Serbia were dedicated to the anti-war movement and were critical of the nationalistic regime and rising political role of the Serbian Orthodox Church. During these years, a once peaceful socialist country turned to aggressive nationalism and polarizing war rhetoric, introducing regressive gender policies where both feminism and everything LGBTQ+ related were labeled as foreign enemies, a homosexual conspiracy, and a Western vice.¹⁶

After 2000, there was another turn. With the first democratic elections in 2000, Serbia entered an allegedly democratic, liberal and pro-EU period of stabilization and growth after almost a decade of economic sanctions and conflicts. However, this process has been observed to be simplistic and misleading; the core system remained unchallenged and a rubber band effect took place. In the past two decades we have seen an almost schizophrenic process of retraditionalization under the banner of ethno-nationalism (which is essentially against LGBTQ+ rights) and neoliberalism following European Union policies.¹⁷ LGBTQ+ activism seems to be stuck somewhere in the middle, between local struggles and international support.

Beyond Single-Issue Activism in Serbia and the Post-Yugoslav Space, *Intersectionality and LGBT Activist Politics*, edited by Bilić & Kajinić, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 110-112.

15 Marjanović, *ibid*, p. 70.

16 Gočanin, S. (2014) Počeci LGBT organizovanja u Srbiji – Pismo iz Slovenije koje je pokrenulo istoriju, *Među nama: Neispričane priče gej i lezbejskih života*, edited by Blagojević & Dimitrijević, Beograd: Hartefakt Fond, 338-339.

17 Velikonja, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-145.

Against this broad backdrop, Inspector's peak activity between 2014 and 2018 was marked by two cornerstone events: a third successful Pride parade in 2014, after which no further Pride parades were banned or prevented until today, and the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first gay/lesbian prime minister of Serbia in 2017. Critics noted that during this period, the right-wing, nationalistic and conservative government failed to advocate for better LGBTQ+ rights and equality, introducing surface-level changes aimed to satisfy the EU.¹⁸ While these events have contributed to better visibility and a more stable presence of LGBTQ+ community in Serbia, it is paramount to question this false sense that LGBTQ+ rights have been finally won with ongoing officially sanctioned Pride parades and a lesbian prime minister.

Keeping this in mind, communicating any LGBTQ+ topics and issues in public spaces in Serbia in the last twenty years was risky in multiple ways. The overwhelming hate speech created a very toxic and challenging environment to work with and in.¹⁹ This atmosphere significantly influenced LGBTQ+ artistic expressions and culture in Belgrade, and Serbia overall. Many initiatives were semi-public, if not entirely private, creating a safe space for expression. Other, more radical initiatives challenged the status quo by *poking the bear*,²⁰ and speaking up about problematic issues in the public, at least for a short period of time.

From the 2000s and well into the 2010s, with the proliferation of LGBTQ+ initiatives and public controversies (such as the Pride parade), the street became an important place for resistance. Many activist tuned to stencils; some noteworthy examples are Gayrila's (Gejrila) *Gej je OK* (Gay is OK), pop culture superheroes defending the attempted 2009 Pride parade (with Batman, Joker, Modesty Blaise, and Superman), *Ne j*bu vas p*deri nego kapitalizam* (The f*gs don't scr*w with you but capitalism does), promotional messages for Pride 2013, IPAK mirrors and stencils with famous feminist authors, and many others.²¹ Many employed humor with political critique, a legacy that Inspector relied on, yet none of them established a continuous presence apart from one-off or short-termed actions which were mostly reactive. The situation changed with Inspector's arrival to the street art scene.

Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled

The groundwork for Inspector's beginnings lie with one of the most influential street artists in Serbia, TKV–The Kraljica Vila (The fairy queen). She and a couple of other

18 Lhullier, C. (2022) The First EuroPride in the Balkans: Why it might take more than a walk to address LGBTIQ+ rights in Serbia," 11. November 2022., 23. June 2024, <https://platform.mk/the-first-europride-in-the-balkans-why-it-might-take-more-than-a-walk-to-address-lgbtiq-rights-in-serbia/>.

19 See: Petković, op. cit; Bilić & Kajinić, op. cit; Danilović, A. (2017) *Grad i slika: Značaj i funkcija slikarskih intervencija u javnom prostoru*, PhD dissertation, University of the Arts in Belgrade, Faculty of Applied Arts; Kisić, I. (2020) *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji*, Beograd: Helsinški odmor za ljudska prava u Srbiji.

20 A common expression *Ne čačkaj mečku* (Do not poke the bear) means do not look for trouble.

21 See: Tunić, *The Adventures of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled*, pp. 14-18.



Figure 1: Jolana Miličičová - Yoda with *Drugačiji pa šta?*, 2013, stencil, Braće Krsmanovića street (photo: Inspector)

women artists introduced street art in Serbia when the first stencils started appearing in Belgrade in 2004. Since then, she has been the Queen, as graffiti writers would say, with an art career that often intersects with activism. In 2012 for IPAK Center and together with Kornelija Sabo, TKV took part in a project and workshop called *Rodno čitanje grada* (Gendered readings of the city), aimed at supporting young activists.

Nikša, who would later create Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled, took part in their workshop, a crucial point for his way to activism. As one of the outcomes, a team of participants including himself realized an independent project called Kissing Area (Mesto za ljubljenje) which operated from late 2012 until 2014.²² Behind Kissing Area was the idea to mark metaphorical safe spaces around the city and position them on public sidewalks and in parks. Playing with the common homophobic saying that LGBTQ+ people should keep to themselves inside their own four walls, the authors created a stencil marking the four corners signifying the walls of a room (or a brick triangle signifying a house), framing an inscription which is (usually) the very name of the project in Serbian.

However, Nikša at some point was dissatisfied with the project since its essentially pro-LGBTQ+ and non-heteronormative messages appeared unclear and people were appropriating the popular stencils as romantic urban spots. At the time he was also expe-

22 Authors were: Anđela Čeh, Sanja Seliškar, Petar Došev and Nikola Nikša Herman. See: Stošić, M. (2015) Face the Wall – (De)kontaminacija javnog prostora, *Politike (ne)prijateljstva: politike jezika i pitanje odgovornosti*, edited by Stošić & Vasiljević, Beograd: Centar za istraživanje kultura, politika i identiteta (IPAK.Centar), pp. 42-43; IPAK.Center, “Kissing area”: <http://ipakcentar.org/kissingarea>; Mesto za ljubljenje/Kissing area Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Mesto-ZaLjubljenje>.

rimenting on his own, under the Nique Chat pseudonym. Some of his early street interventions were playful and humorous counter renditions of homophobic messages and stencils with Freddie Mercury. With the new knowledge of stencil-making and LGBTQ+ activism, very soon he came up with the new project which made its debut at the second Vreva festival in Savamala in 2014.

Like in previous examples of LGBTQ+ activism, Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled utilized the medium of stencils to communicate a combination of text and images, this time coupled with speech balloons drawn manually with markers. The dominant image in the stencil is a pug called Yoda, an adopted pet dog of Nikša. The name comes from Yoda from Star Wars, referencing not only the outward appearance of both characters, but also their age. Together they embody Inspector, in a collaboration between the human and the animal. The dog not only served as inspiration for the character, but accompanied Nikša to almost all of the street interventions, and served as a mouthpiece for his messages (Figure 1). To paraphrase Nikša, “It was as if I was imagining what Yoda would say to all these [homophobic and hate] messages we were encountering during our walks.” The stenciled pug is predominantly life-sized, positioned either within the reach of Yoda the dog (often emphasized on Inspector’s social media accounts), or at the average line of sight of us humans.

In an interview, Nikša described Yoda as: “...a pug, reaction, answer, message, awareness, sobering up, kick in the butt, wordplay, empowerment, defense, protection, questioning, critique, intervention, conversation, joke, memory, recycling, activism, Kissing area.”²³ This multifaceted and repetitive image made this street alter ego a true character tag, at the same time of recognizable authorship and anonymity, a common feature in the world of graffiti and street art. According to our interview, TKV’s colorful stencils and paste ups of strong women inspired his approach, as well as Shepard Fairy’s stickers Obey Giant. In both cases artists were covering the city with their characters, creating persistent and alternative advertising with a sense of mystery. Just like in the Obey Giant case, Nikša was not signing their pieces. In a way, you needed to know who the artist was beforehand or through word of mouth.

One could argue that the choice of a dog brings several interpretations to mind. Dogs are present in the streets of Belgrade, as desirable pets or undesirable strays. Symbolically, “marking the territory” is often related to dogs, as well as social groups such as gangs and sport fans. But Inspector’s approach is far from violent: “I consider myself a peace loving lunatic and that’s somehow a story that I figured out sits well with people and the authorities [...]”²⁴ Doing graffiti and street art through the action of tagging and bombing—covering a large area with your signature/character—is also a way of claiming the public space visually and symbolically. And with a queer perspective in mind, it is a way of claiming space, asking for cultural validation and breaking the silence about one’s existence.²⁵

23 Balaž, M. (2016) Ulično gaženje hejta! *Liceulice*, br. 3 – Sloboda, p. 28.

24 Herman, N. and Jovanović, N. (2016) Yodorus (drugi deo), 1:42–1:53, 26. January 2016., 23. June 2024., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVx57MmG9VQ>.

25 Getsy, D. J. (2016) Introduction//Queer Intolerability and its Attachments, *Queer (Documents*

According to Nikša, Yoda the dog helped him to overcome personal challenges, and by taking care of the animal, he was empowered to make positive changes in his own life and immediate surroundings. The motivation was to face indifference and ignorance, fight violence and hate, and “start with something positive.”²⁶ After taking part in several festivals and collaborating with artist Sanja Pantić between 2017 and 2018, until the dog passed away in 2018. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, he made just a few stencils with Yoda in 2020, and has a large number of messages pending for years that he wanted to put up. Since then, Nikša has been trying to continue his work, possibly with a different approach and a new character. Until that happens, there is a large body of past work that deserves our attention.

Some of the key aspects of public interventions that Inspector introduced was a combination of: an amiable character; clear, critical and diverse messages; humor and wit in playing with words and meanings; queering the public space; and a continuous production. A little pug is an instantly recognizable image, made intentionally cute and benevolent. He stands as the artist’s surrogate, a proxy, and a transmitter of messages. In a fashion typical of stencils in particular, their messages are written clearly, in Latin script, and a great majority in Serbian. The aim was to reach a large audience in public spaces, by utilizing this alternative media of street art. There is also care to the surface below to make the message legible, using markers to contrast the background color.

While activism might sometimes seem dull in its seriousness and utilitarianism, it does not necessarily need to be so. Humor operates in a social, cognitive and emotional way that allows activists to playfully and publicly criticize power. And when activists use it to destabilize dominant ideas, in a discursive guerilla war, they can stir up public opinion and offer alternatives to the prevailing order of things.²⁷ However, many of these humorous and political stunts suffer from a lack of continuity. Many times they are responding to a particular political event or cases of discrimination and do not continue with their engagement.²⁸ The situation is quite different in the case of Inspector who maintained public production for a number of years. Another important element is that Inspector’s messages are not worn-out political slogans, prescribing the desired behavior or attitude. They are targeting our sense of humor and intelligence, like carefully crafted riddles, leaving our interpretation open, but well-informed and with an edge.

Diving into this production is not an easy feat. Unlike Kissing Area, Inspector communicated a larger body of content. According to my research, from almost 200 unique messages, about 30% is related to everyday sayings and general positive messages, 30%

of Contemporary Art), London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p. 44, 79.

26 Marčetić, D. (2014) Krenimo od onog što je dobro – Inspektor Yoda Zgužvani u Zagrebu, 26. November 2014, 30. June 2024, <https://libela.org/razgovor/krenimo-od-onog-sto-je-dobro/>.

27 Sørensen, op. cit, pp. 7-9, 21-22.

28 See: Hvala, T. (2023) Streetwise Feminism: Feminist and Lesbian Street Actions, Street Art and Graffiti in Ljubljana, *Amnis* [Online] 8, Femmes et militantisme, 1. September 2008., 23. June 2024., <https://journals.openedition.org/amnis/545?lang=en>.

question gender and sexuality, and the last 30% are some sort of a social critique.²⁹ They range from pop culture references, social media (mis)use, and everyday sayings, to social critique, gender expectations, and animal rights. In socio-political commentary, Inspector's messages were always relevant to current events.³⁰ The majority of them employ a combination of wit and humor, often subverting the meaning of words, in revealing alternative or transgressive meanings. Nikša tagged the city relying on an interplay between the message, location, available surface and inspiration. Therefore, taking into consideration the physical public space as the space of production and communication in analyzing street art is paramount.

The city space is, after all, a large part of the meaning of these situational artworks, its primary context, created purposefully to be communicative and democratic.³¹ In order to understand the power of both artistic and political street art, we should address not only the content (artwork) and producer (artist), but also context (location) and audience (public, reception). Given the overwhelming number of Inspector's messages, I will focus on a few threads tackling humor and non-violent social critique and discuss placing and meaning-making in interaction with the surrounding context.

Hejteroseksualci: Deconstructing gender



Figure 2: Jolana Miličičová *Budi muško oženstveni se*, 2014, stencil, near corner of Zagrebačka and Koče Popovića streets (photo: Inspector)

²⁹ This number does not include how many times a given message was reproduced in streets.

³⁰ See: Danilović, op. cit, p. 90.

³¹ Young, A (2014) *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 7-8, 25-28; Waclawek, op. cit, pp. 79-90.

Many Inspector's messages are juxtaposing a familiar character—a small almost comic book looking pug—with messages that playfully question everyday life. One of the prime locations for such a strategy is Savamala urban neighborhood where a lot of gender and sexuality messages found their place. From the late 2000s, the neighborhood became known for its art scene, nightlife, clubs, independent, and LGBTQ+ spaces. Nikša's activity in Savamala, first with Kissing Area in late 2013 during BeFem festival and then independently from 2014, takes place at a time when the artistic scene was still vibrant and gentrification was starting to take over, right before the Belgrade Waterfront demolition and construction took place.

A corner between Cultural center GRAD—which is an important LGBTQ+ institutional ally—and the co-called Spanish house features a closely knit group of three stencils on concrete blocks and a wall. *Hejteroseksualci* (Haterosexuals) is a twist on heterosexuals, purposefully mislabeling and problematizing whether being straight equals hate toward sexual and gender difference. *Pis mačo* (Shoo macho) plays with the words mačo (macho) and maco (pussy cat), where instead of shooing a cat (Pis maco) one does so with aggressive masculinity, weakening its power. *Femmenalno* blends *fenomenalno* (phenomenal) and *femme*, equating exceptionality with women. All three can be seen as a critique of masculinity and aggressive heterosexuality which is essentially patriarchal.

Several other messages follow this confrontational gender thread, but one really stands out, *Budi muško oženstveni se* (Be a man, feminize yourself, 2014, Figure 2). “Be a man” is usually said as a teasing encouragement to enact a stereotypical masculine gender role, a synonym to “be brave” in facing difficult situations or proving oneself. According to Judith Butler, since social reality is not a given, but continually constructed through language, gender itself is a performance. She uses this argument to emphasize the fight against oppression that governs “normative heterosexuality.”³² In this line of thinking, we could say that Nikša is performing through his activist queer character as well as commenting on the social performances of gender.

By intentionally employing queering, they are destabilizing heteronormative language and gender (stereo)types, creating fissures for multiple, often contradictory readings. Here the message has a tone of a challenge where manliness should be proven by the very opposite—by being feminine. This is visually underlined by the pug's pinkish background. It functions as a paradoxical contrast which destabilizes common sense and gender expectations. I would also argue that the message could be read in another way. By abandoning toxic masculinity, the message might call to accept the non-patriarchal, non-macho qualities of being a man, creating a balance of stereotypical feminine and masculine behavior (like men publicly crying, showing their “weak” side, etc).

One of the prominent pieces is *Do jajnika*, a funny multilayered world-play which refers to “do jaja,” which roughly translates as awesome. Literally, it means “to the egg,” where egg has the same connotation as testicles in English. IYW replaced the sexual

32 Butler, J. (1988) Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, *Theatre Journal* Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 519–531.

organ by inserting the word *jajnik* (ovary), while the original meaning remains recognizable.³³

Another one, *Ovde je butchno* plays with the words *butch* and *bučno* (loud), referencing the more masculine lesbian butch identity. Of two examples known to me, both are near not only LGBTQ+ spaces but also clubs, whose music is often heard from the street. By this intervention, IYW seems to signal a coded connection between the often protective indoor safe LGBTQ+ social spaces and sometimes threatening outdoors world, but it can also be a commentary about the loud night clubs or amount of noise that this heavy transport hub experienced at the time.

Inspector's messages can be interpreted as a means of claiming existent queer spaces and queering the public space. In the case of locations which have a prior LGBTQ+ history or contemporary social use, but which are often obscured for protection and privacy sake, Inspector was contributing to their coded visibility. On the other hand, everyday public locations which are not explicitly associated with the LGBTQ+ population were queered by inserting queer subjects and topics in a space where they are unexpected, suppressed or invisible.

Drug od drugog: Solidarity, difference and interconnected struggles

Be a man, feminize yourself could also relate to the surrounding neighborhood, filled with graffiti tags and sport fan parodies. Today's Park Luke Čelovića has been called P*cin park (P*ssy park), known for its cis-women and trans sex workers for decades. Challenging masculinity and praising femininity with stencils could be Inspector's way of acknowledging their presence, something Inspector also did with pro-trans content around the city. Interestingly, it is also a place with shifting identity in the mid-2010s which allows kvar—abandoning single-issue and identity struggles. For example, a group of stencils were addressing the notion of otherness and migration.

Around Park Luke Čelovića and along Karađorđeva street, on the walls and large garbage bins, Inspector made a few pieces of *Drug od drugog* (Companion of the other), playing on the words *drug* (friend, buddy, comrade) and *drugi* (other, literally second). At that time the message was made (2014), Savamala was transforming from a transit into migrant hub, especially from 2015 with the large influx of immigrants from the Middle East who were located in the park itself. The stencil called for companionship, to side with the migrants (especially because the message was written in Serbian and not English or Arabic), resisting their othering and exclusion from Serbian society, adding up to other activist voices in the area which addressed notions of racism, class solidarity, war and nationalism. Following the trend, Inspector temporarily abandoned the iconic pug and stenciled the neighborhood with the message *Rasizam ubija* (Racism kills), while *(Od)baci stigmatu* (Throw away the stigma) found its way throughout the city on both walls and garbage cans.

A set of stencils tackled the general issue of difference, such as Kissing Area's *Дру-иачију ња ииџа?* from 2013 (Figure 1) and Inspector's *Drugačija, pa šta?* from 2014

33 *Jajnik* (singular, nominative case), *jajnika* (singular or plural, accusative case).

(meaning: Different, so what?). The latter was reproduced next to an IPAK mirror with Audrey Lorde, both strengthening the feminist undertones and creating a dialogue with the pre-existing piece. Several Inspector messages address the stigma of HIV, which is still widely regarded as a virus that predominantly affects the gay population. Breaking the taboo in a playful fashion, one found in Savamala says *HIV sloveni*. Here Inspector referred to the previous, socialist Yugoslav anthem *Hej, sloveni* (Hey, Slavs), which was used from WWII until 2006. Catchy and subversive, the message has both a historical-cultural reference and acknowledges the visibility of people with HIV among the Slavs (Serbs included). Following the gender thread, many messages addressed the trans* population, emphasizing their visibility in the LGBTQ+ acronym and struggle. Some of them stated: *Padam na trans* (I'm falling for trans), *Trans*fer Ponosa* (Trans*fair of Pride), and *Ne trans*fobiši se trans*formiši se* (Don't trans*phobe yourself trans*form yourself).

As we had a chance to see, although it seems easy to remain in the narrow circle of LGBTQ+ messages, queering as an artistic strategy should not be essentialized. Looking over Inspector's entire opus can provide multiple points of connection and interpretation. Challenging gender norms and posing taboo questions, offering solidarity and confronting ignorance all operate at the same time, and sometimes even place. The combination of these stencils in situ might emphasize a thread, like resistance to gender or social discrimination, or simply expose the passersby with bits of Yoda's wisdom.

Čekam ovas: Countering the Hate



Figure 3: Jolana Miličičová *Neznanje rađa strah* and *Strah rađa nasilje*, 2014, stencils, Knez Mihailova street (photo: Inspector)

By virtue of being in the public space, street art is accessible to the passersby, for better or worse. Due to its unsanctioned character, people might object and react. Street art pieces can be erased, white walled (painted over by city services or tenants), buffed (crossed over by other street artists), or people can engage creatively by adding content of their own. To go back to Velikonja's approach, given location, including third-party interventions, also play a significant role in contextual analysis. We must not forget that this combination of elements is crucial for analyzing the artworks in situ.

In several interventions Inspector reacted upon the already existing hate speech, with the strategy to "decontaminate" the streets.³⁴ For example, in 2015 they joined forces with the initiative *Ne budi ograničen. Misli!* (Don't be ignorant. Think!) to react against ultra-right wing, nationalistic, neo-Nazi, and hooligan hate messages in Belgrade.³⁵ Erasing hate messages in public space is a staple activist activity, but in this case the artists aimed to leave their creative mark as well. In the action called *Hejt ubija – četke na gotovs* (Hate kills – paintbrushes ready), Inspector's made small stencils of pugs walking over "clouds," areas of paint that covered the undesirable content. The joyful colors also make a contrast with often gray or dilapidated surfaces underneath. As we can see in the example from Strahinjića Bana street, an upscale area, they transformed the negative messages into a visual pleasure of looking. This action was coordinated among several cities, which resulted in a unified regional response with other antifa groups.³⁶

While this strategy erased, blurred, or simply crossed over hate messages, contributing to a wall palimpsest, anonymous public feedback can also reveal multiple readings of a given message. Originally reproduced in several locations, standing solo or reacting to a nearby hate message, *J*beš p*dere* (F*ck f*gs) from 2014 received a special treatment (Figure 4). According to Nikša, the motivation was to react to a set of nearby hooligan graffiti by Partizan fans, which were aggressively claiming the area with their signature black and white color. Looking at Google maps, the area is full of them—the closest ones are sexist *Jer lepa si do mog, ГД* (Гробари Дорћол, Grobari Dorćol), *PFC/ПФК* (Partizan football club), and a nationalistic stencil *Пиши ћирилицом* (Write in Cyrillic). Inspector's message explicitly reflected the dual-meaning, implicating both the sexual intercourse (as attraction or aggression) and indifference. Many homophobic men turn out to be unsure of their sexuality and even "latent homosexuals," who channel their aggression towards the LGBTQ+ population. According to Nikša, there is a parallel sentiment where actual gays just want to be left alone from these hetero pressures and frustrations.

34 Velikonja, op.cit, p. 53; Velikonja, M. (2020) Ustavimo LGBT revolucijo! – Kar poskusite! (Anti)homofobni in (anti)patriarhalni grafiti postsocialistične tranzicije, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in novo antropologijo* #280, Boj z neumnostjo / novi feminizmi, pp. 269–284.

35 Danilović, op. cit, pp. 85–86; Danilović, J. (2015) Slavimo Beograd, operimo grafite mržnje, *Liceulice* br. 24 – Bolje da se uzalud boriš, nego da uzalud živiš, pp. 16–17; Balaž, op.cit.

36 Martinović, I. (2015) Zajednička akcija antifašista regije: Ne grafitima mržnje, 25. June 2015, 30. June 2024, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ujedinjeni-antifasisti-regije/27092100.html>; Bagarić, D. (2018) Kako se crta ekstremizam, 30. June 2024, https://autonomija.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/kako_se_crta_extremizam.pdf.

Possibly because the speech bubble used a derogatory word, somebody reacted crossing over in red spray the word *p*dere* and wrote *homofobiju!*, thus changing the message to *J*beš homofobiju!* (F*ck homophobia!). In this interesting twist, with an exclamation mark, the sexual agency and critical indifference is again targeting the homophobic sentiment. In an additional twist, two police officers caught Nikša in the act, asking him why he was writing a seemingly homophobic message on the wall.³⁷ Located on a wall in a small street overlooking the memorial Museum of Vuk and Dositej and kindergarten Mestašće, as well as the nearby Mihailo Petrović Alas elementary school, it was no wonder he caught the police's attention. Eventually, the location remained attractive to other artists; TijanaTri from studio Кришка (Kriška) and Hepa (Nera) made their mural piece just below the Inspector's, directly inspired by his work.³⁸

Nearby Savamala was also not immune to hate messages targeting the LGBTQ+ population that usually appeared before the Pride parades during the 2000s and 2010s, and which proved durable in the streets due to general neglect and/or apathy. Right-wing extremist groups were trying to spread fear and oppose the Pride parade, which they achieved several times with the Pride parades being canceled due to alleged police understaffing and threats of urban violence. Many of them used to spread *Čekamo vas!* / *Чекамо вас!* (We are waiting for you!) messages throughout the city in order to scare the Pride attendants and supporters. While not the first such activist response in Belgrade,³⁹ Inspector introduced a message that challenged the hate messages themselves (2014). By recomposing the two words from *Čekamo vas* into *Čekam ovas* (I am waiting for oats), the original threat has been humorously neutralized with an absurd twist.

Some messages commented on violence in general: *Neznanje rađa strah* (Ignorance gives birth to fear) was sometimes coupled with *Strah rađa nasilje* (Fear gives birth to violence, Figure 3). Others, such as *Ne tuci (p)se* (Do not beat dogs/yourself) extended the fight against violence towards dogs the artist saw being beaten or neglected in city parts.

Sada je najbolje: Hooligans

Many hate messages were employed by a number of sport supporter/hooligan groups, such as the ones in Dorćol neighborhood, aggressively tagging the public space. Dorćol is an old neighborhood, with a rich history and multicultural heritage (Austrian, Jewish, Muslim), in a prime location between the very center and Danube river. Territorially, it has been divided into upper and lower Dorćol, where sport fans of Partizan (called Grobari, gravediggers) claim the upper, and fans of Crvena Zvezda (Delije, warriors/braves) claim the lower part. Both groups of these two biggest sport clubs in Serbia use graffiti, murals and street art for marketing and to extend their reach, physically and

³⁷ Herman & Jovanović, op.cit.

³⁸ Nearby there was a tag by Noriaki from Poland, as well as still standing murals of Snout and GTR/Deroks, the latter featuring the actor Bora Todorović.

³⁹ Example of stencil intervention with superheroes prior to announced Pride in 2009, see: Tunić, *The Adventures of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled*, p. 17.



Figure 4: Jolana Miličičová *J*beš p*dere*, 2014 (photographed in 2017), stencil and spray paint, Gospodar Jevremova street (photo: Srđan Tunić)

symbolically. Hooligans at the time were generally notorious for street violence, homophobia, and their political and criminal ties.⁴⁰ In a few instances, Inspector decided to counter and address their messages that sometimes oversaturated the streets. Given that Dorćol was Nikša's and Yoda's primary home at the time, we can see the pugs as a way to reclaim the public space.

Reacting against hate is only one strategy, as we had a chance to see in the previous section. Apart from clear activist messages, a large part of Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled's opus are everyday sayings, spontaneous jokes and "spreading positivity." One of the positive stencils is *Sada je najbolje* (something like: Now's the best) from 2017. According to Nikša, this "saying which our grandmothers used" indicates a state or situation when all is well. What is interesting is that one of the versions of this stencil found its way to an unlikely place, a football fan mural in their own territory. Near Nikša's neighborhood, lower Dorćol, many walls and almost entire residential blocks have been marked as belonging to one of the largest sport clubs in Serbia, Crvena Zvezda (Red Star). Inspector wanted to test their territoriality by placing another *Sada je najbolje* stencil on their wall, while respecting the existing color scheme (red and white). Poking the bear indeed. Some young fans spotted him during the act, but due to his benevolent behavior and message, let him go unharmed.

⁴⁰ Danilović, *Grad i slika*, pp. 52-62; Velikonja, *Post-Socialist*, pp. 273-326.

But the real elephant in the room is what happens to hooligans who oversaturate the area with their tagging which often remain unchallenged, not to mention hate messages? Popular explanation is that there is no money to whitewall and decorate the old facades, where some owners might be just preparing a fresh clean wall for next taggers, but I think the underlying reason might be simple desensitization and apathy. In other words, the citizens do not notice the discriminatory language anymore, it all becomes white noise in an environment already filled with public advertising. While this might suggest the hate messages are semi-neutralized, even abandoned by not being erased or reacted upon, their content continues to spread and “contaminate” the environment.

A few other interventions also addressed the sport supporters/hooligans. A classic inscription of Red Star's *Делије!* (Delije!) at Lower Dorćol was repurposed by adding an extra Г (G) in front and ? at the back, humorously turning the message into a question *ГДелије!?* (Gdelije?!, Where is he?!). Throughout the city, Inspector also utilized the pug commenting *I navijači tepaju*, playing on the double meaning of the word *tepati* which means both to beat and coo, and so the message stated *Sport fans/supporters beat/coo too*. In a way, in these examples Inspector managed to make a lasting physical and symbolic intervention within the space which is usually extremely homophobic. Seeing this message in its contextual use, I think Inspector created a potent double-alternative: both to violent or overly politicized messages on Belgrade's walls, and the sometimes prevalent victim discourse of the LGBTQ+ community.

Conclusion

I mean, a police officer asked me, “do you truly think you’re going to change anything by doing what you do?” [...] I don’t think so but I can’t be silent anymore, I mean... somehow I think that there’s been enough silence. You can only be silent for so long.⁴¹

Many of these examples can be interpreted as cases of kvar—malfunction of logic, expectations, normative relationships and “common,” “public” opinion. That is, purposefully challenging the alleged neutrality and objectivity of these everyday notions which have been hijacked by ultra-right nationalism, coupled with social solidarity and antifa sentiment. When everyday language reproduces violence and homophobia,⁴² Inspector's guerilla war interventions create ruptures in the dominant discourse by confronting the passersby. The value of these actions is not just in reacting publicly against hate and condemning violence, but also in challenging the desensitization of the public, where these hate messages remain unsanctioned or unquestioned in the streets for a long time. As we had a chance to see, many messages in public spaces made under the ultra-right wing or “banal nationalist” pretext are violent in content or call for violence, contributing to a toxic and fearful atmosphere targeting certain minorities. According to Velikonja, in regards to nationalism, “[s]arcastically speaking, there is always someone to hate.” Street

41 Herman and Jovanović, op. cit.

42 Blagojević and Dimitrijević, op. cit, p. 11.

art can challenge apathy, by giving a public voice to a certain social group, a counter-narrative, and as such is inherently a democratic and political act.⁴³

Reviewing Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled's activism, I want to underline that this little pug is a symbol of hope. While the physical stencils have mostly been erased by now, its messages resonated with the public and are still relevant in today's Serbian society. As we have seen, marginalization, stigmatization and violence towards the LGBTQ+ community have been reproduced in public space, physically and symbolically. Having a critical minoritarian voice in this setting has great potential to create fissures in this context, reacting against desensitization of the general public, confronting the hate messages, and presenting a discourse of its own. Inspector is one of those voices who was queering the streets, destabilizing "the common sense," questioning gender norms, challenging the status quo, and providing alternative gender and social relations.

His own personal empowerment was intentionally reflected in his immediate surroundings: the city of Belgrade, artistic, activist and queer circles. This enabled a certain temporal queer space, interwoven in the everyday fabric of the city. And by expanding the focus outside of "pure" LGBTQ+ topics and activism, Inspector managed to tackle some intersectional potential which reflected not only Nikša's interests, but also the interconnection of struggles. After all, the same urban space is shared by a variety of social groups and individuals encompassing multiple identities, which all points to an awareness of the local context and belonging. As a queered space, it reflects an aesthetic choice, but also fosters minoritarian politics of visibility and brings the private into the public as a means to face prejudices. This is an important decision given the often marginalization and imposed secrecy of queer everyday experience in the public.

Finally, Inspector Yoda the Wrinkled brought play and positivity into the gray city which might be overlooked looking at the sometimes grim messages they were reacting to. Therefore, it is important to shift the weight from pure discrimination, hate and violence (or reaction to it), towards this discourse which brings and supports critical hope. After all, despite the fact that a little pug could not change society, their example challenged desensitization and apathy, which serves as the groundwork for resistance.

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⁴³ Velikonja, *Post-Socialist*, p. 105. But Velikonja also claims that certain extremist political groups can misuse this assumption by voicing out dominant discourse under the guise of a spontaneous anonymous public (publicly stating what the government cannot) or aiming to erase that very same freedom of speech. See: Velikonja, *Post-Socialist*, p. 20, pp. 110-111.

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АВАНТУРЕ ИНСПЕКТОРА ЈОДЕ ЗГУЖВАНОГ

НЕНАСИЛНИ АКТИВИЗАМ И КВИРОВАЊЕ УЛИЦА БЕОГРАДА

Сажетак: *Инспектор Јода Згужвани* је активистички пројекат Николе Хермана Никше, који је заједно са својим мопсом Јодом као алтерегом стварао уличну уметност и уносио критичке коментаре и хумор у нашу свакодневицу и на београдске улице између 2014. и 2018. године. Њихов рад је блиско везан за ЛГБТ+

историју и активистичке интервенције кроз уличну уметност последње две деценије у Београду и пример је локално контекстуализоване и критичке апропријације концепта и термина queer/квир као квара. Кроз скоро 200 различитих порука, Јода се поигравао са свакодневним говором, често кварећи или подривајући оригинално значење, нудећи једну важну родну и друштвену критику у јавном простору који је често био препун агресивних порука мржње почетком двехиљадитих. Неопходно је да сагледамо ове интервенције као „ситуациона уметничка дела“ која служе сврси квировања простора и промовисања идеала ненасилности. Мали шаблони мопса Јоде које је Никша користио да би обележио град могу да се интерпретирају као знак отпора и наде у околини која је склона десензибилисаности на насиље и општу апатију у друштву.

Кључне речи: *улична уметност, Београд, архивизам, ЛГБТ+, хумор*