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Book Reviews

Mitja VELIKONJA, *Post-Socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2020

Reviewed by: **Hana ĆURAK**
Humboldt University of Berlin, Institute for European Ethnology & University of Zürich, Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies

The book *Post-socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe* by Dr. Mitja Velikonja is a systematic and detailed longitudinal study of political graffiti and street art in the post-socialist era of a region. Providing both a theoretical blueprint for culturally analyzing the visual culture of graffiti and street art and an area-specific analysis focusing on the period of transition in the region, Velikonja advocates for the emergence of "graffitology" as an interdisciplinary inquiry into the significance of these cultural expressions. According to the author, this underestimated genre of "profane culture" reflects the complex interplay between social structure, ideology, and aesthetic resolutions in the transitional period of post-socialist countries.

A significant and refreshing contribution to a multidisciplinary field, the book draws on perspectives from subcultural studies, visual culture, urban studies, art history, and anthropology. It invites readers to embrace the role of Benjaminian flâneurs, encouraging a deeper engagement with the visual language of urban spaces, particularly within the post-socialist chronotope, to explore the time-space shaped by three decades of local transformations after socialism. The author, who has documented over 25,000 photographs of graffiti across the countries he has traversed, acknowledges the crucial role of his own positionality in the research, asserting that true

Corresponding author:
Hana ĆURAK, research associate at the Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt University of Berlin; PhD candidate, University of Zürich, Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies
E-mail: hana.curak@hu-berlin.de

understanding comes from reflecting on one's personal position and native environment, as well as that every piece of writing inevitably reflects the disposition of the author.

Velikonja opens each chapter with a selected graffiti piece from his more than two decades of dedicated observation and documentation. From the ironic *"We love academic discourse"* scrawled on a Ljubljana student dorm in 2013, to the Bosnian classic *"We are hungry in all three languages,"* a critique of forced national divisions and the socioeconomic devastation of the post-war transition, to subversive responses to right-wing messages – such as the Slovenian nationalist slogan *"Here is Slovenia!"* overwritten with *"Fuck it, we are here too"* in Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian language – these powerful illustrative examples offer a window into the sharp, humorous, lively and political world of graffiti as well as each chapter's particular theme.

The first part, "Introduction to Graffiti and Street Art Studies", is a methodological intervention into the field, whereas the author proposes a multiangular approach to understanding graffiti and street art as a response to lackings in the field. In it, Velikonja focuses on three specific questions: what to research, how to approach it, and which tools to use. The first subchapter emphasizes the importance of photographing graffiti and street art as a primary research method, highlighting the need for a balanced qualitative and quantitative approach, grounded in extensive, systematic fieldwork. The second explores four key sites of meaning in political graffiti and street art – context, author, image, and audience – laying the groundwork for selecting appropriate research methods, which are further detailed in the third subchapter and applied in the book's empirical case studies. Identifying types, styles and techniques of graffiti and street art, Velikonja is particularly successful in mapping the contested cultural positionality of these forms of expression, correctly placing them away from analyses which would aspire to historicize street art as belonging to a more traditional contemporary art canon. Using, as he outlines, historical and comparative method, geocoding, semiotics of

temporality, autoethnography, urban ethnography, compositional interpretation, content analysis, social semiology, public opinion polls and engaged or militant research, he sees graffiti and street art for what they are, thus empowering them in their vernacularity, becoming a "cultural graphologist", as Dubravka Ugrešić articulated in her comment on the book (2019). Most importantly, as both Ugrešić and Todorova (2019) agree, Velikonja's outlined methodology and its application deciphers complex relationships between social structure, ideology and aesthetic resolution in a deeply political context of transitional societies. The focus is thus on both the graffiti landscape and the spatial and temporal landscape they are participating in, whereas political graffiti are singled out as the most interesting form for interpretation against different forms, such as for example subcultural graffiti characterized by highly stylized lettered shapes, or other forms which have emerged over time.

Velikonja identifies the most recurring themes in graffiti in post-socialist Yugoslavia. He notes that several key themes and historical references emerge in the political graffiti of post-socialist Europe: In the first case study, he examines the post-Yugoslav urbanscape, analyzing how graffiti (de)construct the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia. This is manifested in an "endless quarrel between the supporters and the opponents of the former country, its system, leaders and founders whereas pro-Yugoslav graffiti often feature symbols of Yugoslavia (SFRJ, its herald), its organizations (SKOJ, JNA, ZKJ), communist symbols (hammer and sickle, red star), and celebrations of holidays like The Day of the Republic (29 November). They also venerate Josip Broz Tito, with slogans like "Tito lives" and stencils bearing his image. Conversely, anti-Yugoslav graffiti reject the National Liberation Struggle (NLS), the SFRY, and Tito, sometimes celebrating leaders from the World War II Nazi puppet states. In another case study, particular abundance of nationalist graffiti in the Balkans is analyzed through Adorno's reflections on the "jargon of authenticity," while extreme-right street art in Slovenia is examined within the framework of modern and postmodern fascism, drawing on Lipset and Mouffe's theories of the radical center. Velikonja points out that examples frequently involve

nationalist marking of the territory (*"This is our home, we are the masters here!"*), striving for ethnic purity, and expressing anti-cosmopolitan sentiments. Examples include painting public surfaces in national colors, displaying national symbols, and slogans asserting national belonging. Nationalist graffiti, observes Velikonja, also dehumanize perceived opponents and invoke historical grievances, sometimes with violent undertones (*"Serbs on willow trees"*). There are also anti-nationalist reactions in the form of graffiti that critique and subvert nationalistic messages, as seen in the "Love a Serb" intervention on a hateful message. A significant trend is the emergence and proliferation of extreme right-wing and neofascist graffiti, particularly in countries like Slovenia. These often feature Nazi symbols, numerical codes, and slogans promoting white power supremacism. Euro-nationalism is also evident, with graffiti advocating for a "pure" Europe (*"Europe for Europeans," "Freedom to Europe"*) and opposing the integration of certain countries into the EU. These graffiti express hostility towards communism, multiculturalism, antifascism, and migrants ("*Down with communists," "Multiculturalism is white genocide!," "Anti anti-fa,""Immigrants get out"*). In other case studies, Velikonja outlines how contemporary graffiti also recontextualize historical figures like Gavrilo Princip and Rudolf Maister, turning them into subcultural icons to express current political agendas. Their visual representation on the streets reflects ongoing contests over meaning and historical interpretation. National symbols, such as Mount Triglav in Slovenia, become sites of ideological struggle in graffiti, with different political groups appropriating them to convey their understanding of Slovenianness. The refugee crisis has triggered a significant amount of graffiti in post-socialist Europe, particularly in Slovenia, often depicting refugees as the new Other. These graffiti frequently employ hate speech and xenophobic rhetoric (*"Stop immigration," "Immigrants get out," "Foreigners get out," "Stop the invasion of Europe"*). Velikonja notes that in Slovenia, these hateful street

comments often anticipated the restrictive measures taken by state authorities. Similarly, to which Velikonja dedicates another chapter, football fan graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe often intersect with political ideologies, sometimes displaying extreme nationalist or right-wing symbols and slogans.

One of the most significant and prophetic contributions Velikonja makes in the book is by asking the question, what is the relationship between neofascism expressed on the streets and the one in the dominant institutions and their actual policies? Rather than opposing each other, there seems to be a silent agreement between street-level extremists and mainstream politics, leading to what Velikonja identifies as "shameful compliance," where street politics and official agendas are intertwined. When authorities are unwilling or unable to express politically incorrect views, right-wing extremists use graffiti as a platform to voice those sentiments publicly. This division of labor sees extremists expressing extreme views on the streets, while those in power implement similar policies in less overt ways. The swastikas and other hateful symbols found in graffiti are not isolated acts but are seen as an "evident continuation of politics by other means," illustrating the deeper connection between street-level extremism and broader political currents.

The book *Post-socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, both in its original English version and its local translations, makes a valuable contribution to understanding the accelerated convergence of marginal and alternative cultures with the mainstream. It highlights their integration into increasingly repressive, complex, and stratified affective and political systems – particularly in transitional societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and other post-Yugoslav countries. Additionally,

the book offers a crucial framework for addressing other transitional issues that can be explored using the same methodology. A largely underexplored avenue for future research, grounded in Velikonja's work, could focus on how street art is shaped by the transitional contexts of dispossession while its societal role remains fundamentally misunderstood. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, street art is often misclassified as the sole manifestation of contemporary art. It is frequently instrumentalized for profit and donor-driven agendas, with claims of social engagement in a post-conflict society. This instrumentalization strips street art of its subversive potential and has a broader impact on visual art practitioners, who are either marginalized or conflated with street art due to the absence of institutional frameworks capable of distinguishing between the two. Decision-makers, practitioners, and the public, often with limited knowledge of these fields, continue to confuse street art with contemporary artistic practices, further marginalizing both and contributing to the ahistoricization, erasure and relativization of a politically forward Yugoslav avant-garde artistic practice and legacy. Building on Velikonja's methodology, future research could explore the depoliticization of street art in these dispossessed contexts. How does the commodification of street art undermine its critical role in challenging dominant ideologies? What are the broader societal implications of this process? Unpacking such dynamics could further contribute to Dr. Velikonja's generous and successful endeavor to "*Resist, motherfuckers*!" as a Sarajevan graffiti he took a note of in 2010 demands.

ORCID iD

Hana ĆURAK https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3868-0872

Author biography

Hana ĆURAK (Sarajevo, 1994) is a research associate at the Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt University of Berlin. Her research interests broadly emerge from the intersections of memory studies and cultural anthropology, focusing on contemporary art and curatorial practices. In her PhD project (University of Zürich, Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, from Spring 2024), *titled Collectiveness and Radical Futures: Shared Curatorship as Intervention*, Hana ethnographically explores whether collective curatorial practices are able to intervene across different temporalities and social and political contexts. At the Institute for European Ethnology, Hana is currently associated with the Collaborative Research Center *Intervening Arts*, where her research focuses on intervening collective curatorial practices in the context of (post)Yugoslavia. She also works in media and is the founder of the interdisciplinary platform *Sve su to vještice* (*It's all Witches*), a collective dedicated to sustaining and advancing feminist discourse in the (post)Yugoslav context with the aim of radical intervention into possible feminist futures.