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## **Spatial Mobility of Fine Artists and Local Identity/Identities: From Serbia to Greece and *Vice Versa***

### **Abstract:**

This research has focused on a reverse impact of street painters' mobility, i.e. migration and remigration, on their creativity and social environments in which they create.<sup>2</sup> The work was created based on a profound case - study research of academic painter and graphic artist, Dragiša Ćosić, who started his creative Odyssey in Serbia, spent 14 years creating in Greece and returned to Belgrade in 2014. He is one of the artists who can be seen almost daily on Knez Mihailova St., whose artwork influences the formation of city's visual identity. This paper, following an analysis of narrative, visual and written material, perceives painting and graphic art as a medium for expression and merging of various cultural identities (academic space/street, local/global identity, trendy/universal, Serbian/Greek etc.).

### **Key words:**

Artist, migrations of fine artists, graphic art, local/global identity, Knez Mihailova Street, Serbia, Greece.

### **Introduction**

When street fine arts are mentioned, very often graffiti are the first association, a phenomenon dealt with by many anthropologi-

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2 This paper is the result of Project no. 177027: *Multiethnicity, Multiculturalism, migrations – contemporary process*, by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia and the international scientific project *Art practices and urban promenades (pedestrian zones). Comparative ethnological and anthropological study of Belgrade Knez Mihailova Street and Dionysiou Areopagitou Promenade in Athens*, which is realised in cooperation with the Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and The Laboratory for Folklore and Social Anthropology, Department of History and Ethnology, Democritus University of Thrace.

cal (and not only) researches (Đorđević 2016). However, unlike the static wall *graffiti*, in this study we will deal with the presence of „mobile“ fine arts on city streets, the *graphic art*, where the artist himself is present and at the same time he is both the exhibitor and the one „exhibited“ to different natural and social factors – the views and comments of passersby, the weather conditions, etc. Here we will talk about the mobile setting which daily crosses the line of private space, the artist’s home, and goes into public space, the promenade, and which is put together and taken down every day by the artist himself.

Walking down Knez Mihailova Street, from the Cepter Museum and what used to be Mitić shopping centre, a booth with graphics draws attention with a Greek flag and a sign in Greek that says „At Dragiša the Greek’s“ on it.



Dragiša Ćosić, the Art Academy trained painter, has been displaying and selling his works in Knez Mihailova Street since 2014 (Fig. 1). However, his own professional journey and development started long before that. Through the analysis of the case study in this work we will try to view the issues related to the artistic identity and the spatial mobility of the artist in a wider sense, and on different levels, for example, the transition from an academic work environment (teaching) into the space of street work, periodical ex-

hibiting in recognized gallery spaces – street comprehended as daily exhibition settings. The work also views reasons for migrations, going abroad and remigrations, the returning, as well as the feedback of the influence of changing the place where the creative work is being done on the creativity itself, on the choice of motives. A separate whole is made by the issues related to the influence of the presence of both artist himself and his creativity on the forming of the urban space identity where it is being performed.

In this study I used the anthropological approach in the research of a life story. Both foreign and Serbian anthropologists sometimes resort to the biographical method in their research, reading through a biography as a kind of an ethnography (Lukić-Krstanović 1997; Kovačević 2013; Gorunović 2014; Blagojević 2014).

Through this artist's professional and personal Odyssey different historical and socioeconomic processes which take place on a wider social plan can be viewed. This work was completed based on field research by the method of the interview with Dragiša Ćosić, as well as in the informal conversations about his life and professional development in Belgrade during 2017.

## **A short biography of the artist**

Dragiša Ćosić was born in 1951 in Negotin where he finished primary school and a teacher's high school. He studied graphics at the Art Academy in Novi Sad in professors Halil Tikveša and Živko Đak group and he finished his postgraduate studies of graphic in Belgrade in professor Nebojša Radojev group. He worked as an art teacher in primary school in Negotin. When he moved to Belgrade in 1986 he continued his teaching career until 2000 and after that he became a free artist. He is a member of ULUS (Association of Fine Artists of Serbia) since 1987 and a member of the Greek Association of Artists since 2008. He has displayed his works in many group and individual exhibitions at home and abroad since 1968. His works are exhibited in museums, private collections and galleries in several different countries (Fig. 2). Besides graphic, he deals with painting and drawing. He is the author of documentary films: „I give my life, but I do not give Krajina“, „I have had enough“, „Where are you, man“, „The conclusion“, „In my mother's house“.



## Poetry and prose

Dragiša Ćosić has been writing poems and prose for several decades now. He wrote within the literary circle in Novi Beograd,

together with Mile Nedeljković, the ethnologist, among other people (Nedeljković 1990, 297). His poems were published in literary magazines. His three poems collections, which are in manuscript, were presented in Đura Jakšić's house in Belgrade in 2007. They are: „In tree crochets“, „On the wings of Archangel“, „I ask myself“. There are about 130 (a hundred and thirty) poems, which were all written between 1996 and 2014. These collections are translated into Greek as a whole. For three years now the manuscript has been waiting to be published by a Greek publisher. The novel „My grandmother Romaida“ (in manuscript) is named after his Vlah grandmother. Short stories collections in manuscript are called „Stories we used to love“ and „A smile in a suitcase“.



### The Rovinj period

As a painter and graphic artist, Dragiša Ćosić started to exhibit and sell his works on the street between 1985 and 1991 during the summer months in Croatian town Rovinj (Fig. 3). In the 1980s many Serbian artists worked in the streets of Rovinj. A painter and graphic artist, Velizar Krstić, was a great support to Ćosić and encouraged him by saying: „You have the goods, you have a lot to offer, there's no shame in it. Street is a public gallery.“ He obtained the permit to

work on the street, but he also exhibited his works in galleries and was awarded several times. Altogether, the Rovinj period was „a nice experience“ for him.

## Going to Greece

Thanks to his connections with colleagues from Greece, in 1996 he arrived in the town of Elasona at the foot of Mount Olympus together with the folklore ensemble from Negotin carrying his graphic works with him. An independent exhibition followed in 1997 in Thessaloniki.

Dragiša Ćosić also expressed his creativity through performance art. During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 he was engaged in street performances in front of the ULUS gallery in Knez Mihailova Street. At the same time he was the author and the performer of these artistic socially engaged performances.<sup>3</sup>



He continued to express his revolt in Greece in Thessaloniki in Aristotelous Square during the summer of the same year, when he

<sup>3</sup> More about Performance art see in: Šuvaković 1999.

made a great performance with his Greek colleague Athanasios Digenis (Fig. 4). He glued newspaper photos with the horrors of the bombing of Serbia onto the asphalt and „attacked“ them with paper planes. The Greek media reported about it in five newspaper articles. In September 1999 he had an exhibition in Litochoro, a town at the foot of Olympus. There he presented an anti-war performance at the museum of weapons from the Byzantine period. In the same year, the Negotin television made a documentary „Where are you, man?“ which was about the performances in Greece presented by Ćosić and his Greek colleagues.

Between 1977 and 2000 he taught art at the Belgrade's primary school „Isidora Sekulić“. Due to a small number of children, he did not have a full time job, which decreased his already small income. Due to the economic crisis, art works were not in demand and many galleries were closed. Ćosić decided to take two years of absence from work and emigrate to Greece. Between 2000 and 2003 he worked at a gallery - studio in Katerini and then moved to Thessaloniki where he lived and worked at a gallery-studio and did not exhibit on the street. However, between 2003 and 2013 he spent two months each summer working on the island of Kafalonia where he sold his art on the street. He made friends there and has good memories of this place. He keeps in touch with friends mostly by telephone conversations. „Last year all my friends from Thessaloniki came to visit me in Belgrade. I spent many years there, my soul is there.“



He talks about the way he was accepted in Greece: „I found a mother and a father, brothers and sisters and other children and grandchildren in Greece.“ Their incredible hospitality made a huge impression on him. For several years he was a regular guest at his Greek friends' Sunday lunches and holiday feasts: „I was always invited to Christmas and Easter dinners“. One's profession can be one of the factors deciding on how one would be accepted and integrated into the new surroundings. According to Ćosić, as an artist he „gets connected with a different world, some different people. I am an artist, they can see that my work is valuable“. However, besides the attractive factor of the artistic profession, my earlier researches indicated the existence of ethnic closeness, a positive acceptance of Serbs in Greece (Blagojević 2010a; Blagojević 2010b; Blagojević 2016).

### Academic/street art identity

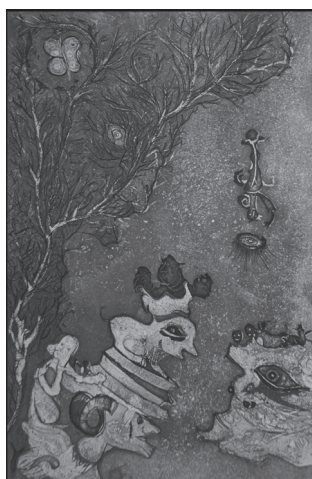
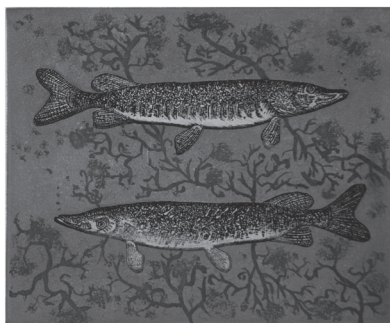
Dragiša Ćosić makes a break through the academic pattern transforming the public space of the street into the open space gallery (Fig. 5). In his case, these two spheres – the academic and the street ones – are complementary. He has always had a gallery space and work on the street that function as an advertisement for his art work. He feels that for an artist work on the street is „an everyday exhibition“ which is „rare and a privilege“. The works he displays and sells on the street are of the same quality as those in galleries.



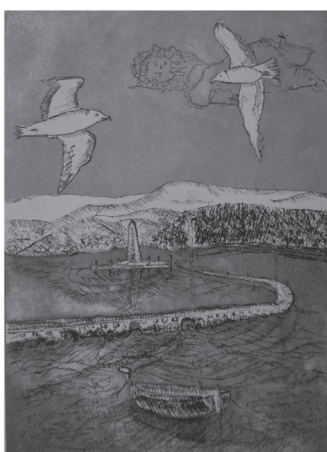


## Art motifs – the local in the global and v.s.

In more than one decades of Dragiša Ćosić's work, a number of interlacing creative cycles can be defined. A common characteristic of his art works in all the different phases are fantastic motifs (Fig. 6). The motifs from Negotin, his hometown, are permeated with pagan deities, ritual processions, childhood stories, objects with Vlah motifs and visions. While he was working with children at the school, he was also developing his art. Motifs related to the animal world are frequent. The sea world with the accent on fish stands out (Fig. 7). „Stories about people“ – portraits and self-portraits make a separate whole. Then, landscapes and still life. A separate cycle is inspired by the Greek mythology: Poseidon (Fig. 8), Icarus, Pegasus, Europe (Fig. 9), etc. Various themes, like Adam and Eve, the Mother of God, are taken from Christianity.



One might assume that certain recognisable local themes would attract buyers. However, this research proves different. During the first couple of years on Kefalonia Ćosić sold „Belgrade themes“, for example, the Nebojša Tower and the Austrian Gate (Fig. 10). When buyers – tourists asked where those buildings were, he told them that they were „here somewhere on Kefalonia, you look and you will find.“ When he actually made some Kefalonia themes, they were sold much less (Fig. 11). These „Kefalonia themes“ include the Piskardo bay, the lighthouse at Argostoli, Milsani, a sand beach with small pebbles. The Myrtos cave which opens up towards the sky. A hundred years old English bridge, etc. Therefore, buyers and the market only partially influence the choice of motifs. As for the format of the works, there are some quite small graphics but there are also bigger ones, from 1m with 70cm and 110 with 60cm.



## Space limits and time frames

Selling on the street includes a great physical and mental involvement of an artist. Year after year, in summer and in winter, in various weather conditions, the exhibit needs to be displayed and put away in the evening daily (Fig. 12). In wet weather, works are covered by plastic spreads.



A permit must be obtained from the city authorities. A contest is organised once a year in Belgrade by the city authorities. The testing of artists is adjusted to the art they are dealing with. Artists enter the

contest with a file compiled of their works, biography and the copies of works they wish to exhibit. Besides, candidates take a sort of an „entrance“ exam. They do the given theme in their own art technique. A board of ten experts evaluate the works. Then the candidates are ranked. The best get to work in Knez Mihailova.

In Knez Mihailova Street, artists can display their works within a two metres space which is marked with a yellow line on the asphalt. The communal police strictly controls the space frames and not even one painting can go over the line, or else the artist must pay a fine. On Kefalonia, the approved space is 2.5 metres. However, since Ćosić was the only artist, he had 6 metres, so he could display as many as 30 paintings. In Knez Mihailova Street, artists are allowed to exhibit an incomparably smaller number of works.

As for the time limits, in Knez Mihailova Street they work mostly during day time, the allowed time is between 10 am and 10 pm. In winter time Ćosić begins work around 11-12 am, and in the summer around 2 pm „when there’s a shade“. Although the allowed time is until 10 pm, the turnover is actually until 9 pm. On Kefalonia, they work more at night, until late at night, which suits artists „better“, as they say.

### **Sales and communication – a painter „at the shop window“ of the street**

Communication skills of an artist are very important when comes to exhibiting and selling on the street. Dragiša Ćosić balances between unobtrusiveness and a kind approach to people who address him (Fig. 13). That is why there is a board with a note saying that that is an exhibition and the artist invites all the interested people to look at the works without pressure to buy any of them. If, however, they want to purchase a piece, there is a price tag on each of them.

Very often he uses nonverbal communication, gestures, while communicating with foreign buyers. He speaks his mother tongue, the Vlach language, then Serbian, which he learnt when he started school and uses most, and Greek, which he learnt as an adult. He says that „the Vlach and Greek languages were of more help to him than French which he studied at school, but never learnt properly“. With

Romanians he speaks Vlach. He says they are polite buyers and „they always buy something, even if it is just for the sake of being polite.“

„When people see your art – they also see your soul and want to get to know you. They sit and talk with you. There’s trust between you. In Greece some of the customers also became my friends. We used to go for a swim together and we had fun. It is important to trust each other“.

Ćosić is mainly approached by people who know what graphic is. Some of them are attracted by motifs, themes, others by the technique, colours. There are no strict rules when comes to the ethnic structure. For example, on Kefalonia, the graphic „The Mother of God with Jesus Christ“ was bought by a woman from Novi Sad in the first year it was exhibited for sale. In Belgrade, both foreigners and Serbian people buy the works. He has regular buyers.

Many Atheninas spend their holiday on Kefalonia and they „bring culture with them“, according to Ćosić. „They can feel the art.“ He made good business and friendly contacts with some of them. Every year they came to see what new works I had done. In Knez Mihajlova Street he has „old customers“ who come every year from the diaspora, for example there is an older Serbian woman from America who buys graphics for presents.

The Greek flag on the stand attracts Greek tourists: „When a Greek goes abroad, first he looks for a fellow countryman. They see the flag and the text in Greek, they come to the stand and ask if I am Greek. I say that I am a Vlach here and they say that - it is basically the same thing.“ For Greek tourists, Dragiša represents a certain kind of tourist-info, since he, as an insider, can give them the information on what to see, in which restaurants to eat, etc.

According to Ćosić, in order to make a living from art, one needs to create a market. The street engagement of many years pushed him to create. It was necessary to show new goods. In addition to that, he had exhibitions in art galleries. That is how he was able to support his family, but he could not make a fortune. An artist’s goal is to sell his works and „make a living out of it“. There are great differences in earnings, but also in costs, in Serbia and in Greece. He feels that the prices of his works are realistic and is rarely willing to lower them. He would rather give a small graphic for free than lower the price.

The artist points out that it takes patience and endurance to work on the street: „It all depends on how much you can take. If you can endure, you can make progress. You must not pay attention to certain things and look back. I have been through so much, good and bad. I try to forget the bad. Some people could not manage. I knew what I wanted and pushed forward.“

## **Leaving and coming back**

The main driving factor for the migrations of this artist was the economic crisis. Since he was not able to support his family by doing his job, he migrated to Greece, and 14 years later he reemigrated to Serbia from the same reason. For Dragiša Ćosić, art is a way of life, but also something that he makes a living from.

The years he spent in Greece enriched Ćosić's personal and professional life on several levels. Firstly, he says that learning the Greek language is a great gain for him. Secondly, his art has been enriched by many themes that he would not have used if he had stayed in Serbia. He travelled through Greece meeting people and getting to know the landscapes. As he says, he „made wonderful lifelong friendships“. Thirdly, he was inspired to spend more time writing poems and stories. Besides that, he made a big library of books in Greek. He plans to go to Greece and spend 15-20 days there to see his friends and organise some exhibitions at art galleries.

During the time he spent in Greece he never completely lost his connections with his homeland. Every three to four years he had individual exhibitions in Belgrade. He especially likes working in Knez Mihailova Street because it helps him to reconnect with old friends and acquaintances. Colleagues and former students approach him.

## **Conclusion**

Street sales contributes to the social visibility of an artist. On the other hand, through their works and life stories one can comprehend a wider picture of historical and social processes, migrations, remigrations, national minorities, ethnic closeness and distance, verbal/nonverbal communication, etc.

Analysing the material obtained in field research in this case study, the mobility of the artist Dragiša Ćosić can be concluded on several different levels. Education is shown as the first propellant factor, moving from the hometown of Negotin to Novi Sad for further schooling, then to Belgrade. Mobility for business – economic reasons ensued, from a teaching position in Belgrade, to street work in Rovinj, and then in Greece, in a studio in Thessaloniki and the promenades in Kefalonia, and finally the return to Serbia and work in the pedestrian zone in Knez Mihailova. In connection with the business mobility is the mobility from private to public space, the daily transport of art material from home to the street space.

Besides spatial, there is also the mobility on a spiritual level of the artistic expression and communication. On the level of verbal communication, the use of different languages stands out, the transition from the native Vlach to the Serbian language in which he received education and then used for teaching, and later the use of Greek when he moved to Greece. With regards to a nonverbal communication, one can notice movability with regards to the artistic expression, art (graphics, drawings, paintings), street performances, films, poetry, prose. In communication with buyers on the street, informal sign language, hironomy, is used in case there is no mutually spoken language.

Analyzing the life story of Dragiša Ćosić, we come to the conclusion that in different life stages, depending on the current social and cultural factors, he used different creative expressions (graphics, art, performance art, poetry, literary work, etc) in opening to the *other* and the *different*. Spacial mobility of this artist enabled him to accomplish an active dialogue with the world surrounding him. Absorbing the artistic stimulation in different cultural environments, he discovers himself and tells a story about who he really is and who the people watching his art are.

In the case of Dragiša Ćosić, migration and remigration happened out of economic reasons. One of the main „push“ factors for moving to Greece was the inability to provide for his family with his teacher’s salary and the money he earned from art. Ćosić was well accepted in Greece both on personal and professional levels and he was emotionally fulfilled, but due to the Greek economic crisis he was forced to go back to Serbia. This research has shown the difference in motives for remigration compared to the results of the

remigration studies from the USA, where emigrants remigrated to Serbia in the second half of the 2000s for family or personal reasons (Blagojević 2015).

Besides the influence on the forming of a visual identity of the city by the works of art, the graphics by Dragiša Ćosić in this case, it can be concluded that with his own opinions and esthetic criteria, in his conversations with tourists the artist directly affects the forming of the visitors' impressions of the place where he exhibits on the street, whether it is Rovinj, Kefalonia or Belgrade.

During his lifetime, the artist Dragiša Ćosić cut through many lines, going from the academic circles, the teaching position, into the street space, street selling which he believes to be his own everyday exhibition setting. With this, he is sending us a clear message that the mere exhibiting in recognised galleries does not „create“ an artist, but that the artist himself is the one who transfigures the space, reinventing the urban zones by giving them a new artistic dimension.

Figure 1. Artist Dragiša Ćosić in Knez Mihailova Street, July 2017

Figure 2. The National Museum Belgrade, graphic workshop, 1998

Figure 3. Artist Dragiša Ćosić in Rovinj in 1985

Figure 4. Anti-war performances during NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999

Figure 5. Street gallery by Dragiša Ćosić in Kefalonia Island, Greece, 2007

Figure 6. Prehistoric Tree of Life (2013)

Figure 7. Red Fishes

Figure 8. Poseidon

Figure 9. Europe

Figure 10. Kalemegdan, Belgrade

Figure 11. Seagulls, sea

Figure 12. Packed exhibition, Kefalonia Island, 2007

Figure 13. On the street with the buyers, Kefalonia Island, 2007

All photos are from Dragiša Ćosić's private archive.



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## Гордана Благојевић

### Просторна мобилност уметника и локални идентитет/идентитети: из Србије у Грчку и *vice versa*

У фокусу интересовања овог истраживања налази се повратни утицај мобилности, тј. миграције и ремиграције уличних сликара на њихово стваралаштво и на друштвена окружења у којима стварају. Овај рад је настао на основу истраживања студије случаја академског сликара и графичара Драгише Ћосића, који је започео своју креативну Одисеју у Србији, провео 14 година стварајући у Грчкој, а затим се вратио у Београд, 2014. године. Он је један од уметника које је, скоро свакодневно, могуће видети у Кнез Михаиловој улици, а чији рад утиче на формирање градског визуелног идентитета. У овом раду се, кроз анализу уметничког наратива о животу и стваралаштву, као и визуелног и писаног материјала, сликарство и графика сагледавају као медијум за изражавање и повезивање различитих културних идентитета (академски простор/улица, локални/глобални идентитет, у тренду/универзално, српско/грчко итд.).

**Кључне речи:** уметник, миграције уметника, графичка уметност, локални/глобални идентитет, Кнез Михаилова улица, Србија, Грчка