

Murals as Memory Carriers. Analysis of the Meanings Given to Them and the Attitudes of Their Creators

Adrianna Krzywik

The Maria Grzegorzewska University. Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
aksd9@aps.edu.pl

Abstract:

The phenomenon of wall paintings has been developing in public space since the Mexican Revolution. Murals are used, among other purposes, to capture memories. Moreover, they are one of the most popular forms of representation of the past in public space, commonly called memory carriers. In the discussion of the research being carried out, the opportunities associated with the formation of historical awareness and attitudes towards society's past through commemorative murals will be highlighted.

The research was conducted from July to November 2020. It was based on the analysis of the existing materials – photographs of commemorative murals (significant and marked elements) and interviews with semi-structured memory agents. The first stage of the described research focused on the authors of commemorative murals.

The aim of the research was to determine the meaning and values that the creators of murals have given in general and in particular to the commemorative murals made by themselves. The research allowed, among other things, to answer questions concerning the artistic path of the creators (graffiti environment), what factors influenced the process of making mural (family history, one's own past, finances, social involvement), worldview and values of the declared creators (patriotism) and attitude to the politics of memory.

Keywords: muralism in Poland; commemorative murals; memory carriers; memory media; urban space

Resumen:

Los murales como portadores de recuerdos. Análisis de los significados que se les atribuyen y las actitudes de sus creadores El fenómeno de las pinturas murales se viene desarrollando en el espacio público desde la Revolución Mexicana. Los murales se utilizan, entre otros fines, para capturar recuerdos. Además, son una de las formas más populares de representación del pasado en el espacio público, comúnmente llamados portadores de memoria. En la discusión de la investigación que se realiza, se resaltarán las oportunidades asociadas a la formación de conciencia histórica y actitudes hacia el pasado de la sociedad a través de murales conmemorativos.

La investigación se realizó de julio a noviembre de 2020. Se basó en el análisis de los materiales existentes: fotografías de murales conmemorativos (elementos significativos y marcados) y entrevistas con agentes de memoria semiestructurada. La primera etapa de la investigación descrita se centró en los autores de murales conmemorativos.

El objetivo de la investigación fue determinar el significado y los valores que los creadores de murales han dado en general y en particular a los murales conmemorativos realizados por ellos mismos. La investigación permitió, entre otras cosas, dar respuesta a interrogantes sobre la trayectoria artística de los creadores (entorno de graffiti), qué factores influyeron en el proceso de realización del mural (historia familiar, propio pasado, finanzas, implicación social), cosmovisión y valores de creadores declarados (patriotismo) y actitud ante la política de la memoria.

Palabras clave: muralismo en Polonia; murales conmemorativos; soportes de memoria; medios de memoria; espacio urbano

Resum:

Murals com a portadors de memòria. Anàlisi dels significats que se'ls donen i de les actituds dels seus creadors El fenomen de les pintures murals s'ha anat desenvolupant a l'espai públic des de la Revolució Mexicana. Els murals s'utilitzen, entre altres finalitats, per capturar records. A més, són una de les formes més populars de representació del passat a l'espai públic, comunament anomenats portadors de memòria. En la discussió de la recerca que s'està duent a terme, es posaran de manifest les oportunitats associades a la formació de consciència històrica i actituds envers el passat de la societat a través de murals commemoratius.

La recerca es va dur a terme de juliol a novembre de 2020. Es va basar en l'anàlisi dels materials existents: fotografies de murals commemoratius (elements significatius i marcats) i entrevistes amb agents de memòria semiestructurada. La primera etapa de la investigació descrita es va centrar en els autors de murals commemoratius.

L'objectiu de la recerca ha estat determinar el significat i els valors que els creadors de murals han donat en general i en particular als murals commemoratius realitzats per ells mateixos. La recerca va permetre, entre d'altres, respondre preguntes sobre el camí artístic dels creadors (entorn del graffiti), quins factors van influir en el procés d'elaboració del mural (història familiar, passat propi, finances, implicació social), visió del món i valors dels creadors declarats (patriotisme) i actitud davant la política de la memòria.

Paraules clau: muralisme a Polònia; murals commemoratius; portadors de memòria; suport de memòria; espai urbà

Resumo:

Murais como portadores de memória. Análise dos significados dados a eles e as atitudes de seus criadores. O fenômeno das pinturas murais vem se desenvolvendo no espaço público desde a Revolução Mexicana. Os murais são usados, entre outros fins, para capturar memórias. Além disso, são uma das formas mais populares de representação do passado no espaço público,

comumente chamados de portadores de memória. Na discussão da pesquisa em andamento, serão destacadas as oportunidades associadas à formação de consciência histórica e de atitudes em relação ao passado da sociedade por meio de murais comemorativos.

A pesquisa foi realizada no período de julho a novembro de 2020. Baseou-se na análise dos materiais existentes - fotografias de murais comemorativos (elementos significativos e marcados) e entrevistas com agentes de memória semiestruturados. A primeira etapa da pesquisa descrita teve como foco os autores de murais comemorativos. O objetivo da pesquisa foi determinar o significado e os valores que os criadores de murais têm dado em geral e, em particular, aos murais comemorativos feitos por eles próprios.

A pesquisa permitiu, entre outras coisas, responder a questões relativas ao percurso artístico dos criadores (ambiente do graffiti), quais os fatores que influenciaram o processo de confecção do mural (história familiar, passado, finanças, envolvimento social), visão de mundo e valores dos criadores declarados (patriotismo) e atitude para com a política da memória.

Palavras-chave: muralismo na Polônia; murais comemorativos; suportes de memória; mídia de memória; espaço urbano

Riepilogo:

I murali come portatori di ricordi. Analisi dei significati loro attribuiti e degli atteggiamenti dei loro creatori. Il fenomeno delle pitture murali si è sviluppato negli spazi pubblici sin dalla Rivoluzione messicana. I murales sono usati, tra gli altri scopi, per catturare i ricordi. Inoltre, sono una delle forme più popolari di rappresentazione del passato nello spazio pubblico, comunemente chiamati portatori di memoria. Nella discussione della ricerca svolta verranno evidenziate, attraverso murales commemorativi, le opportunità legate alla formazione della consapevolezza storica e degli atteggiamenti nei confronti del passato della società.

La ricerca si è svolta da luglio a novembre 2020. Si è basata sull'analisi di materiali esistenti: fotografie di murales commemorativi (elementi significativi e marcati) e interviste ad agenti della memoria semi-strutturati. La prima fase della ricerca descritta si è concentrata sugli autori di murales commemorativi.

L'obiettivo della ricerca è stato quello di determinare il significato e i valori che i creatori di murali hanno dato in generale e in particolare ai murales commemorativi realizzati da loro stessi. La ricerca ha permesso, tra le altre cose, di rispondere a domande sulla traiettoria artistica dei creatori (ambiente dei graffiti), quali fattori hanno influenzato il processo di realizzazione dei murali (storia familiare, proprio passato, finanze, coinvolgimento sociale), visione del mondo e Valori di creatori dichiarati (patriottismo) e atteggiamento nei confronti della politica della memoria.

Parole chiave: murali in Polonia; murali commemorativi; supporti di memoria; supporti di memoria; spazio urbano

Résumé:

Les peintures murales comme porteuses de souvenirs. Analyse des significations qui leur sont attribuées et des attitudes de leurs créateurs. Le phénomène des peintures murales se développe dans l'espace public depuis la Révolution mexicaine. Les peintures murales sont utilisées, entre autres, pour capturer des souvenirs. De plus, ils sont l'une des formes les plus populaires de représentation du passé dans l'espace public, communément appelés supports de mémoire. Dans la discussion de la recherche effectuée, les opportunités associées à la formation d'une conscience historique et des attitudes envers le passé de la société seront mises en évidence à travers des peintures murales commémoratives.

La recherche a été menée de juillet à novembre 2020. Elle s'est appuyée sur l'analyse de

matériaux existants : photographies de fresques commémoratives (éléments significatifs et marqués) et entretiens avec des agents mémoriels semi-structurés. La première étape de la recherche décrite s'est concentrée sur les auteurs de murales commémoratives.

L'objectif de la recherche était de déterminer le sens et les valeurs que les créateurs de murales ont donné en général et en particulier aux murales commémoratives réalisées par eux-mêmes. La recherche a permis, entre autres, de répondre à des questions sur la trajectoire artistique des créateurs (environnement graffiti), quels facteurs ont influencé le processus de réalisation de la murale (histoire familiale, propre passé, finances, implication sociale), vision du monde et valeurs des créateurs déclarés (patriotisme) et attitude envers la politique de la mémoire.

Mots-clés : muralisme en Pologne ; peintures murales commémoratives; supports de mémoire; supports de mémoire; espace urbain

Introduction

Urban space as a socio-spatial structure is accessible to all its users (Bierwiazzonek 2018 and 2015; Smagacz-Poziemska 2017: 35; Wallis 1990: 45). It is in this space that the daily lives of the actors of public space take place, from the performance of everyday individual interactions, such as commuting or walking (Pineda 2017: 16 after Bourdieu 1999), to activities of a social nature, i.e. participation in protests, anniversary celebrations, or the collective revitalization of space (Gehl 2014). Thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others, analysed space as a sphere in which historical, political and social events take place. Space in their understanding is an open field of interaction.

Social activities in shared space are framed in a certain way, which in a way determines the behaviour of its users – they define what behaviour on the street is correct and what is not acceptable. In addition, the urban space is an area that facilitates communication and interaction of its inhabitants, which enables the formation of social bonds between them. This is only possible when every user of the social space actively participates in decisions affecting this space (Remesar & Vergel, 2020a,b: 114). By undertaking activities in urban space – whether individual or joint activities interfering with the visual sphere of the city – communities become attached to the place, which in turn contributes to the construction of local identity (Lewcka 2008), and that affects the valuation of urban space (Bierwiazzonek 2015; Wallis 1990). Valuing is an unconscious phenomenon – individuals feel more connected to a given space and less to another, they like one place more than the other. It is primarily about attachment, which influences the identification with fixed elements of the surrounding reality. As Henri Lefebvre wrote „each living body is space and has its space; it produces itself in space and produces that space” (Lefebvre 1991, 170; cited by Huffs Schmid 2013).

Places of particular cultural and social value become inseparable elements of the identity of a given community. It is similar in the case of sites where important events for this community occurred in the past. These may be more or less distant events. In both cases the place is saturated with memories- it has its own separate identity, it is characterised by a symbolic dimension- it is identified with a given event or a character related to it. Space is one of the factors (apart from time and language) that influence the formation and dynamics of memory (Halbwachs 2004).

Sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*) are important elements shaping the identity and identification of a given collective (Nora 1989). For the last quarter of a century, memorials have been treated as anything to do with the past. This notion has been successfully developed and defined in recent years, above all concerning the notion of a memory carrier (Kula 2002). Well, not every medium of memory is a site of memory (this fact will be clarified later in this article). Sites of memory should be treated as places of permanent topography, connected with an event from the past. According to this statement, a place of memory will be, for example, a place of execution of a given community or a place of birth of a given figure. Sites of memory are thus testimonies of a shared past, while carriers of memory are means of commemoration.

This article focuses on commemorative murals in Polish cities. It investigates the essence of their implementation and the message they convey about the past. The results of a qualitative study conducted with the authors of commemorative murals are presented. This study aimed to establish the meaning that the creators give to commemorative murals and to determine what declared values guide the creators when they undertake the execution of these projects.

Urban space and the memory boom

Memory has a special place these days, although the turn to the past is not a new phenomenon. Over the last few decades, memory studies have developed at a remarkable pace. The intensification of commemorative activities occurred in the late 20th century. This time is often referred to as the „time of memory” (Golka 2009;139), the „era of commemoration” (Nora 2001: 59), or the „memory boom” (Blight 2009). The one of the impulse to conduct research and archive historical materials was, the dying out generation that is particularly affected by the crimes of the Second World War. The generation from which we could learn through first-hand historical facts and vivid memories. They began to commemorate and preserve the memories as the last witnesses of history. These memories were recorded in notes, diaries or audio and audiovisual material. Thanks to the development of information technology, we

can now come into contact with their experiences and the tragedy they endured. However, we know, that the further away from the source of information, the more distorted this knowledge becomes.

Memory can be both a space of communication and space of conflict. This has to do with the „democratisation of memory” (Nora 2001: 41), i.e. the expression of one’s views about the past, the expansion of political participation of citizens in the dialogue around the past. Research around the „memory boom” focuses on how nations remember – on the one hand, nations identify with the image of the past disseminated in the public space, while on the other hand, they look for an appropriation of the past by the authorities. The role of power in shaping the politics of memory was emphasised by Jan Assmann who called it the stimulator of memory (Assmann 1992). Politicians use the past to shape a historical narrative favourable to themselves – remembering the more important and forgetting the less essential facts of the past (Light, Young 2015). Each successive change of power that interprets the past and the results of research on its facts differently than the previous one can influence political and social attitudes or even distort memory. Looking at this matter from this perspective it can be assumed that the memory research becomes a form of protest against the search for truth and shared traditions, as a consequence of the obliteration of the past.

Both memory and sites of memory can be transformed or even obliterated. An important aspect in this perspective is the will itself to remember, to reminisce and to pass these memories on to future generations. The shape of memory depends on how these memories are transmitted and how their memory is maintained.

Knowledge of the past grows out of the memories of witnesses to history. History witnesses are people who were observers, participants in historical events. Most often they are people who have experienced the trauma of armed conflicts. In their memoirs they present a subjective point of view, therefore the content of their lives is the best testimony of history. Unfortunately, as many years have passed since the most dramatic periods of the past (such as the Second World War), there are fewer and fewer witnesses of history in the world. The chance to learn history from the first source has therefore diminished. Given this, they began to record the memories they passed on in the transmission of tangible and intangible memory carriers (Kula 2002: 7-31). In principle, a memory carrier can be anything, because it hasn’t been clearly defined yet. They can be both objects and actions that remind us of the past. They constitute intentional and involuntary elements of historical culture (Szpociński 2021: 93). This research is mostly focused on an intentional carriers of memory, i.e. those that are created to commemorate and protect from being forgotten. Currently, the scene of commemorative activities in Poland has become, above all, the space of cities marked by trauma.

Ideas on how to shape traumatised space are numerous in contemporary discourse. The dominant way of commemorating past events is to create traces of the past in the space of everyday life. Their function is to nurture and expose historical events to work through a given trauma. This entanglement of past and present allows to better understand the sequence of historical events and their consequences. It also constructs the past and draws conclusions in the present. However, everything depends on how the past is constructed through the politics of memory or common knowledge about it. This knowledge can last, precisely thanks to places and memory carriers, and their analysis allows to understand what the transmission of memory is about.

The key role in the transmission of memory is played by commemorative practices (secondary memory), which enable to confront with the past. These practices include activities such as national celebrations. Every country celebrates national holidays at least once a year, thus expressing continuity with the past and referring to historical events – they make the past present without detaching from it. Ritual practices are a kind of symbolic commemorative ceremonies through which the past is brought closer and updated in the form of a performance. According to Durkheim, participation in such a ceremony allows the participants to feel as a part of a collective (Durkheim 1964). Belonging to a social group allows one to build a collective identity.

In the context of identity, it is worth mentioning its relation to territory. It would be difficult to recall an event without thinking of the place where it took place. For example the Battle of Warsaw or the Warsaw Uprising, both these events refer to Warsaw – the city to which they are connected. Pierre Nora believed that sites of memory are not created out of nothing, but require a series of social rituals – repetitive and enduring over time – that transform a „place” into a site of memory. This was also the case with Warsaw, space where cyclical commemorations take place. Maurice Halbwachs, the founder of research on memory, wrote that societies do not so much find commemorative practices in space as produce them themselves based on shared ideas, values and beliefs. Thus, it can be said that memory is constructed not so much by power but based on intersubjective relations as well as by social practices (Pineda 2017: 9). As a result of these practices, symbolic places are produced with which society identifies itself.

These sites are a factor of memory formation. Their materiality makes them inscribed in space as public memory. Thanks to the meanings given by people, space is transformed into a marked place. Cities are above all a set of symbolic signs in an area referring to certain values and a field of struggle for symbolic power (Castells 1972: 241). Urban space is one of the most important areas of memory transmission because it reaches a large group of people over a longer period (permanent location of memory carriers). This is why disputes between agents of memory occur there – clashes of different discourses of memory and commemorative practices. In the city, the narration of the

dominant group creates social standards, dictates what is worth commemorating and what should be forgotten, and determines the location of the carriers of cultural and collective memory in space. These activities shape the identity of the city, but their role remains largely unexplored.

Cities, and in particular capital cities, were symbols of their kind, which is why during wars they were the most damaged areas. This phenomenon can be seen in Warsaw, which is a symbolic place because of the Warsaw Uprising. A capital that was destroyed and then rebuilt. It has been transformed by growing needs – not forgetting the history of this city, but combining it with the present. It was impossible to preserve all the urban sites of memory, so in their place objects were created to strengthen and testify to the past of a given space – carriers of memory entangled with both the past and the present. According to Marcin Kula, memory carriers are objects in or through which memories are stored (Kula 2002: 7-31). These objects are a tool for the transfer of memory, through which it is possible to shape historical awareness among recipients. Objects are most often associated with a collection of items used by past generations, but they can also be objects created on purpose – commemorative plaques, monuments, or murals. It is difficult to expect passers-by to read small, dark plaques at memorials, especially as they have become a conventional form of commemoration. Murals, due to their large form, their location in space and their colours, which stand out against the façades of buildings, reach their audience more quickly, therefore can be better remembered than smaller commemorative forms in urban space.

Commemorative murals – an attempt to define them

The idea to investigate the phenomenon of commemorative murals arose from observing the changes that are taking place in the way of commemorating in urban space (Burszta 2016, Karkowska 2016), as well as the so-called „mural boom”. Murals in the space of Polish cities have started to appear since 2010. Of course, commemorative murals are painted in urban spaces all over the world, but in Poland, a country with a traumatic past and one that constantly tears at its wounds, commemorations are one of the main elements of urban spaces.

What are commemorative murals? Commemorative murals are monumental paintings-monuments belonging to street art, which represent the past in public space (Malczewska-Pawelec, Pawelec 2011). Commemorative murals are currently one of the most widespread alternatives to the traditional carrier of memory, which is a monument. Murals commemorate people of merit in Polish culture, science, national defence, historical and armed events, but also fictional characters. They contain



Fig. 1. Fragment of a mural with the date 1920



Fig. 2. Fragment of a mural with a slogan referring to the victory of the nation



Fig. 3. Mural „Suwałki for the Independent” in Suwałki (Poland)

symbolic signs – significant elements (names of events, characters, cultural products) and marked elements (ideas, values or patterns of behaviour). For example, on murals commemorating the Battle of Warsaw can be found symbols as the year 1920, slogans referring to the freedom of the Polish nation or figures to whom we owe the victory. Taking the message apart, we can think about the values that guided the heroes.

They are included in the set of memory carriers and thus contribute to the restoration of memory and the formation of historical awareness (Upalevski 2017, Szpociński 2014, Nora 1989, Kula 2002). Moreover, they can contribute to the formation of local and national identity by referring to a shared past. Commemorative murals can also give identity to a place if it relates to its context. Commemorative murals usually appear around the anniversary of a past event – they commemorate battles or the death of an important person for Polish history or culture. They are also painted to honour people who have been violently killed or died in accidents in contemporary times – examples include the Mural of Tutuman, who was murdered in Gullyland, Jamaica during inter-community violence (Meikle 2020: 112), or murals relating to an event that reverberated around the world namely the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Commemorative murals are therefore not only painted to honour important events or individuals but are also used as a tool to mourn individuals, to work through trauma. All

of these features demonstrate that it is a social art that is part of a strategy of both social and historical politics. What can be learned from studying memorial murals in Poland? Among other things, it shows that politics, the state authorities, have a huge influence on how and what elements of the past are remembered or forgotten. Commemorative murals are a representation of the community's ideas about the past (Hołda 2020: 48). Such a narrative allows for thinking about the past and historical figures in binary terms (Czerwiński 2014: 32). An interesting phenomenon that occurs due to the scientific queries conducted by historians is the phenomenon of 'heroes falling from the pedestal'. This can be seen, for example, in the demolition of monuments and the changing of streets that refer to the communist era (Light, Young 2015). Observing the phenomena around commemorative murals, we also find such collective behaviour, although more often by individuals, whose aim is to paint over figures with an unclear past or who represent values incompatible with those shared by that individual. Examples include the vandalised murals commemorating the members of the Blind (e.g. Białystok, Mińsk Mazowiecki, Gorzów Wielkopolski). The aforementioned carriers of memory in urban space are cultural artefacts, which can influence recipient and stimulate them to reflect, despite the simplified manner of presentation. Commemorative murals do not analyse the past, they are its specific record, an expression of a popular form of patriotism (Hołda 2020). Popular and pop-cultural to a certain extent, all because of the constantly changing world. Commemorative murals do not only have a commemorative function but also (or perhaps above all) an educational function. Due to the decline in interest in the past among Poles (Kwiatkowski et al. 2010), a new form of the sensory experience of the past has emerged (Szpociński 2005). Oral or textual messages have given way to visual messages. We live in times when the image has become more important than the word. Therefore, commemorative murals as monumental paintings can reach a wide audience, leaving in their memory an image depicting some figure, some event. A mural can be an impulse to deepen knowledge. All it takes is a short slogan, the name or date of an event, or the name of a character to create an opportunity for further research on a topic.

Memory makers

Transmitting information about the past through a mural is one of the elements of memory transmission. In this process, an important role is played by the originators (often institutions rather than individuals) and creators of commemorative mural projects, who are more broadly classified as actors of memory (Nijakowski 2021, Bogumił 2012) or more narrowly as memory makers (Głowacka-Grajper 2016: 67

after Kansteiner 2006), sellers of memory (Kapralski 2012: 57-58). These individuals or groups produce or participate in memory practices (Sroczyńska 2018) – in this case, in the realisation of memorial murals. They initiate the realisation of such a carrier of memory in urban space, so to some extent, they direct historical politics and can act on memory. In particular, producers of memory such as politicians, museologists, popularisers of history and other creators of culture influence whom society should remember and who should be forgotten. What is interesting in terms of research is the degree to which individual memory actors decide on the creation of a commemorative mural.

Looking at individual realisations of commemorative murals in urban space, we can observe similar initial stages of execution, such as the announcement of a competition (institutions) or the submission of an idea (individuals or institutions) for a mural depicting a given figure or referring to a given event (most often these are commemorative murals, the „unveiling” of which is supposed to coincide with anniversary celebrations). The main role in the process of creating or transmitting social memory through murals is played by the initiators – individuals or groups of individuals active in politics, cultural institutions and institutions of remembrance. They are the ones who commission, finance or launch competitions for commemorative murals. Muralists are rarely responsible for what a given commemorative mural depicts. They usually win a mural design competition or receive a direct commission containing a set of information useful in the process of creating a memorial mural design. However, it should be borne in mind that these backgrounds can intermingle. Nevertheless, the creators of commemorative murals, artists who undertake commemorative actions, are most often treated as people who undertake such a project due to the improvement of their financial situation, which is usually unsatisfactory from the moment they graduate from art academies or courses. We can find confirmation in research reports on the situation of artists in the labour market (Brylowska 2020). On the other hand, in addition to financial benefits, artists also derive satisfaction from leading a creative life in urban space (Zukin 2009: 729). Muralists help to build urban space, they give it character and at the same time, they become recognisable as artists – urban space is an open gallery of art, therefore more people interact with the department that is the mural. What is more, the message contained in the mural may have a partial source in the declared attitudes of the artists.

According to the users of the urban space the mural of Marek Edelman (Fig. 5.) painted by Darek Paczkowski in Warsaw’s Muranów district may serve as an example of the realisation of commemorative murals. This mural was originally located in a different place and was painted over due to the revitalisation of the building. Then there was a problem with its return to the new façade. In response to the problem, the residents of Muranów made sure that the mural was repainted in another location. This

phenomenon proves that the residents identify themselves with the visual element, which is the mural in their close surroundings. There are many more such examples, but the best confirmation of this thesis are activities aimed at restoring murals.

Thus, we have extreme factors (financial benefits and declared values) which influence the muralist's decision to undertake a commemorative mural. This was also the origin of the idea to survey with artists of commemorative murals. The study was to find out what factors influence muralists to undertake commemorative actions and to determine what meanings muralists ascribe to commemorative murals.

Method

Commemorative murals are nothing but another carrier of memory in public space – after commemorative plaques and monuments – the result of a unified public discourse around memory. Therefore, the study due to the chosen category of murals falls within the research on social memory. Memory is treated as a complex phenomenon changing under the influence of various factors (Olick 2008b: 159), manifested in various areas of contemporary society (including street art) (Gubała 2012: 66).

To capture the phenomenon of commemorative murals in a novel way, it was decided to plan a series of qualitative studies – individual in-depth interviews (IDI). The method of semi-structured free interview (based on prepared thematic threads, general topics that were planned to be discussed during the conversation) was chosen due to the desire to reach the sphere of the respondent's experiences, thus establishing a closer relationship with the respondent (Silverman 2006).

The first of the planned series of research was conducted with the creators of memorial murals – muralists – between July and October 2020. The research group consisted of creators of commemorative murals. The interviewees in the research group were selected purposively. In the first (preparatory) stage of the research, commemorative murals were searched and analysed (that were photographed and then put on the Internet by entering the phrase commemorative murals in the search engine). A factor in the selection of murals was decided by their location in Polish localities, as the research focused on Polish commemorative murals – in large and small towns, as well as in villages, to have a broader view of the phenomenon of murals in public space. Subsequently, the artist who painted a given commemorative mural was searched for and their muralist output was analysed. The main assumption for the selection of respondents was at least one commemorative mural painted in recent years. In the next stage, the artists were contacted electronically via publicly available information on websites to schedule an interview. Twenty interviews were conducted with the

creators of commemorative murals. The analysis of the empirical material made it possible to characterise the group of muralists who undertake commemorative murals. The respondents are between 30 and 55 years of age. The majority of them have an artistic education degree in painting, graphic arts, etc. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, interviews were conducted by telephone and via instant messaging. The empirical material was analysed and coded using MS Excel and MAXQDA.

Results

During the individual interviews, each person responds to the asked questions and answers in a different way. However, if the same opinions, formulations appear during the interviews, we can assume that we are dealing with phenomena prevalent in a given society. Especially when it comes to research on memory or historical politics, interviews are the best method of collecting empirical data.

The muralist environment.

Already at the stage of searching for creators of commemorative murals for the research group, it turned out that women are underrepresented in the Polish mural environment (successfully interviewed 7 women out of 20 interviews conducted). This is probably because painting murals, firstly, involves work at height and, secondly, with constant contact with chemicals, i.e. work that is particularly dangerous to life and health. Perhaps the stability of employment is another factor that contributes to the fact that women are less likely to take up monumental painting.

Some people have completed painting courses or self-education to fulfil their passions. A significant part of the respondents comes from the graffiti environment. They defined their beginnings in street art as artistic-partisan activities. They cited personal experiences related to the illegal painting of tags, stencils, or stickers on the facades of buildings. The respondents indicated that those actions caused a high level of adrenaline in them, as well as the pride that their work would appear in public space.

„... this is public space, it's our space, we have the right to interfere in it. Surprisingly, it has been so untouchable until now (...) but if I or someone else is not harming anyone, they have the right to create a mural or other art”.

People interviewed are experienced mural artists, they are leaders among muralists. Only a few of them could say exactly how many murals they have painted so far. Only

one interviewee, to document his activities, created a map with murals which were painted so far. Why can the creators of commemorative murals in Poland boast a rich heritage in the field of street art? Most probably, thanks to the chosen category of murals, which like no other is allowed to exist in urban space. Space is owned by state and local government institutions. It is these institutions that announce competitions for commemorative mural projects or, as in the case of most of the interviewees, issue a direct invitation to their implementation. The commissions that artists have received and continue to receive from state authorities testify to the enormous role of historical policy in shaping collective memory (Nijakowski 2006, Traba 2006). Of course, every commemorative mural sponsored by state and local government institutions is followed by appropriate financial means for its creator. Moreover, it can count on publicity, due to the promotional activities surrounding the undertaking.

„... more and more people are trying to smuggle their art somewhere in the public space so that it is noticed...”

Motives for undertaking the commemorative mural.

Staying on the subject of the benefits for artists who paint commemorative murals, similar statements concerning the financial situation after completing one's studies were echoed in the interviews. Some of those interviewed had previously been involved in easel painting, but this had not brought them financial stability. Painting murals has improved the financial situation for almost all respondents. Only one of the interviewees is doing murals pro bono.

However, the improvement of the financial situation is not the most important factor for the decision to undertake commemorative murals. Rarely the artists do other work besides making murals, let alone work unrelated to painting. Painting plays the first fiddle in their lives. The main intention of the muralists was to present the community with historical figures they valued. They more often referred to the figures than to the events – figures with whom they identified because of the attitudes and values that the commemorated people followed in their lives.

„ ... is a very important figure to me, whom I personally value and respect, which is why I wanted to paint this mural in his memory.”

„I wanted this figure to appear in this very place. Not only was she a heroine but she was also a good person. It's important to remind people of universal values, of kindness and goodness coming from the heart”.

The respondents emphasised that the murals they create are an expression of their



Fig. 4. Mural of John Paul II in Nowy Sącz (Poland)



Fig. 5. Mural of Irena Sendlerowa in Cieszyn (Poland)



Fig. 6. Mural of Ludwik Zamenhof in Warsaw (Poland)

feelings and opinions, as well as a record of experiencing history. In the interviews some of the interviewees showed an interest in history (most often instilled by the family) as a motive for undertaking commemorative activities. The interest in the past was sustained by older family members, so it can be concluded that most of the interviewees are rooted in tradition (Slowinska 2014). Some respondents shared their own experiences and family stories related to the nation's past.

„You know, sometimes I've wondered about that, all in all, it pushes me sometimes to be so active and I think that the observation of today's reality and the knowledge of history, its fidelity above all and social fidelity is a huge driver for me.”

The historical message constructed by the commemorative murals is important to the respondents because of their sense of belonging to the Polish nation and society. Furthermore, when asked a hypothetical question about taking part in the defence of the country, an overwhelming proportion answered that they would have taken an active part. This demonstrates an attachment to the homeland.



Fig. 7. Mural of Witold Pilecki in Tarnowiec (Poland)



Fig. 8. Mural of Marek Edelman in Warsaw (Poland)

Muralists would not undertake the execution of a mural on a subject contrary to their views, or on a controversial subject, i.e. one which is not generally accepted by society. As we can see, there is no place in the Polish public space for murals referring to the problem of the members of the effigy of Christ. These murals are usually painted over or vulgar slogans are written on them (Fig. 9., Fig. 10.). The respondents also gave the example that they would not take up murals referring to the Nazi ideology. Interestingly, none of the statements included opinions on murals referring to communism.

„I would not undertake the execution of a mural presenting content with which I do not agree as far as the world view is concerned, with themes which arouse my inner opposition, e.g. due to anti-humanitarian values, threatening the good of man, nature, the planet. In my opinion, the message of a mural should be deeply considered, it is first and foremost a public visual message for which you have to be responsible.”

„One that would be contrary to my political, ethical or moral views. I am an extremely civically engaged person, I have specific views and beliefs, I have opinions on many issues, I try to live following them – as an artist, even for any amount of money, I will not get involved in a project that goes against my beliefs.”

Because of such declarations, it can be concluded that the declared values and attitudes of the artists influence the undertaking of commemorative actions. The commemorative actions in which the muralists engage are intended to stir the imagination and interest and influence the attitudes of the audience.



Fig. 9. Mural of Łupaszka in Gdańsk (Poland)



Fig. 10. Mural of cursed soldiers in Wrocław (Poland)

For the interviewees, the basic attitudes and values that should guide society are not only related to traditionally understood patriotism. According to the respondents, patriotism should be modernised, it should concern not so much love for the homeland as care and openness to other people.

„Mundane matters such as paying taxes or being kind to other people are important. This is what modern patriotism is for me. It’s not just about taking care of your homeland, but about small gestures in your everyday life.”

„Not what he is identified within right-wing circles. For me, it is synonymous with highly conscious, wise and honest citizenship. With actions for the benefit of the development of the country in which I live; educational development, economic development, cultural development. I see local patriotism, probably the most sincere and visible one. And I see a caricature of patriotism, the one that emerges from the propaganda activities of political circles and their resultant, twisted patriotism of nationalist circles.”

Attitude to historical politics.

Even though the commemorative murals that are close to their hearts and commemorative actions that are important for them. All of the artists stressed that there are far too many such realisations in public space. Statements were made about the „cultivation of martyrology” in the space of Polish cities and the constant tearing of the wounds of the past.

„Nowadays there are many institutions, many local organisations that keep the memory of the past alive (...)

sometimes it works out, but sometimes it's a horrible cepeliada".

„There are spaces where there is too much martyrdom. Warsaw is such a city of memory because of what happened in the capital. It is filled with monuments, plaques, murals, installations commemorating the Battle of Warsaw, the Warsaw Uprising, the Ghetto Uprising.”

From the statements of the interviewees it can be concluded that there are such events and figures which are canons in the contemporary historical culture, for example the Battle of Warsaw, also called the Miracle on the Vistula, or the Warsaw Uprising, the largest armed action of the Home Army during World War II. During the interviews, the respondents recalled their past realisations and shared their experiences around the painting. Almost everyone referred to projects under the auspices of state institutions. When artists receive an invitation to create a mural, the concept they receive usually contains top-down assumptions about what should be included in the mural and how the message should be captured.

„... it has to be this and that in the designs. Everything is usually already specified and you cannot come up with your creative invention, because it is usually passed over in silence”.

The muralists pointed out that historical politics has a huge impact on whom society will remember and whom will forget. Moreover, in their opinion, historical awareness is shaped according to the guidelines of the ruling parties – for one group a given person may be an authority, while for another one just the opposite. Respondents referred to examples of destruction by the authorities of monuments created during the People's Republic of Poland (PRL). Interpretations of the past depend not only on historical queries but also on changing authorities. The interviewees emphasised that the current discourse of memory has a negative perception of the PRL times.

They referred to the attitudes of politicians, who directly signalled in the media to the contemporary society that „it was bad during the so-called communism”. Among the statements made by the authors of the murals, there were both opponents and supporters of this opinion. Nevertheless, each of them confirmed that the way the authorities shape the memory of the past may influence political and social attitudes and even distort the memory of Polish society. The retrieval of traditions to create and model national identity is nothing other than the basis of the theory of the politics of memory, which Lech Nijakowski writes about in his work. As a confirmation for contemporary changes in the politics of (historical) memory, they cited the example of Catholic clergymen whose life values and attitudes, as it turns out, are significantly different from those thanks to which their likenesses have been immortalised on monuments or commemorative plaques.

Each of the interviewees observed that commemorative murals are most often commemorative murals, i.e. murals created on the occasion of anniversary celebrations.

„Sometimes I could see by the murals realised what we are celebrating in a given year ... „

„... When we created this mural, the next day we found out that these murals were created at the same time in Warsaw, I don't know, probably 5 or so, or something like that in different parts of the city. Overnight, practically just for the 65th celebrations, so many murals appeared, and then they started to appear like mushrooms after the rain. More and more of them appeared. And what is more, while the first murals were created by people with a pretty good artistic sense and were not obvious, I think they were often even slightly critical, the ones that appeared after them were not guided by a sense of art, and as a result, the space became chaotic...”

In many statements, there were observations concerning the context of the place of the commemorative murals. For the majority of respondents, the location where the mural will be painted is important – in their opinion, the place where the commemorative mural will be painted should be a one of memory, because this place is marked by history, which the mural would complement (Nora 1989), and thus preserves the historical continuity of the place (Lewicka 2008: 213).

The significance of commemorative murals.

According to their creators, commemorative murals are meant to commemorate some person or event, to spread knowledge about the historical armed struggles of Poles, about distinguished figures. Moreover, for the muralists, they are a form of restoring memory and making the past present – they warn against a fate that could happen again. They contribute to the preservation of cultural continuity and the intergenerational transmission of values, because murals commemorating a particular person bring the recipient closer not so much to the character as to their deeds and the values that guided in their life, which is why they are an example to follow and can help build moral attitudes (Szpociński 2005).

„I also think that today's commemorative murals fulfil the role of the monuments of the past, only in a heavily tuned form. You can commemorate a person, but also an idea, values, or an event, so the formula here is quite broad.”

„Murals have a value related to remembering, quite

simply. Remembering is important, although, I want to emphasise, not being stuck in the past, but being a conscious participant in the present who simply remembers.”

„Commemorative activities are important, they connect us, both artists and audiences to our cultural heritage, they build a certain identity, belonging and awareness. Places and people cease to be anonymous or forgotten for future generations. They can still be a part of our common living story. They serve as an example, inspiration, or at least allow us to understand the background of certain events, behaviours and attitudes.”

Such activities, according to the majority of the respondents, are aimed at developing a sense of belonging to a community among the recipients, as the common reliving and celebrating of past events important for a given community, orders the reality for a given nation.

„... they are important because they remind us of a shared past and rebuild those communities ... we integrate”

„It would be ideal if murals could in some way influence the awareness of their recipients, evoke emotions and a sense of pride, so that it wouldn't be necessary to stick to the idea of making things prettier, but that something more would follow”

Although aesthetic values were important to all the artists, each of them much more valued murals with a message they convey. Among the statements, commemorative and social murals received the greatest approval, while advertising murals received the least recognition. Among commemorative murals, the artists distinguished between historical and patriotic murals. According to the authors, historical murals most frequently depict the history of a locality, its architecture and elements which no longer exist in this space. Patriotic murals refer to persons of merit for the Polish Armed Forces and events that had an impact on the formation of the Polish nation. Strictly commemorative murals included murals commemorating contemporary authorities (sometimes also living figures) as well as fictional characters- film heroes. Apart from commemorative murals, the artists also appreciated social murals, which address problems occurring in the world around us. These murals most often complement social campaigns. The muralists put advertising murals, which in comparison to the aforementioned categories do not convey any deeper values beyond advertising, in the balance.

In addition, the respondents appreciated the fact that murals are a cheap form of aestheticising a neglected space and also become a tourist attraction for the city. They repeatedly referred to photographs taken by the public and to the marking of their murals on social networks.

Conclusion

As the years go by, the ways of commemoration change. Memory materialised in the form of commemorative murals is an agreed version of memory, popularised in contemporary discourse (Gubała 2012: 66). This article turned its attention to urban space, which has experienced a 'mural boom' and a 'memory boom' in recent years. The study aimed to establish the meaning given to commemorative murals by their creators and to find out what declared values the creators are guided by when undertaking these projects.

The voice of the creators of commemorative murals was of the greatest importance in this article. The research made it possible to answer the research questions posed – above all, it showed the significance of murals in the space of Polish cities and brought the attitudes of muralists closer.

According to muralists, commemorative murals convey and sustain the memory of groups, directly influence the formation of the historical consciousness of society by reminding the past with their message (Gubała-Czyżewska 2018). They are usually commissioned by local authorities and state institutions, which confirms the assumption that murals are an agreed version of memory in the contemporary discourse of memory. Murals that projects have not been assessed by the authorities and residents of the buildings could not be carried out. Their arbitrary execution would then entail an illegal activity in public space. Moreover, murals can give identity to a place if they refer to its context (Jagiello, Modnicka 2015, Taborska 1996). Thanks to murals commemorating the past, the past is present in the present.

When it comes to the motivations that guide artists when they undertake commemorative murals, the predominant ones, in this case, are the desire to present their work to a wider audience (the urban space has become a public art gallery) and material benefits (artists do not hide the fact that creating murals has improved their financial situation). Most of the respondents also indicated their attachment to the history of the nation, which is why they undertake such activities. The creators of commemorative murals are well-known artists – this is evidenced by requests for proposals from local government institutions.

An interesting direction for future research could be a psychological analysis of the muralist community in terms of self-efficacy. One direction of future research could be to examine the local community living close to a commemorative mural or the producers of memory who decide when and what murals will be created in the public space of Polish cities. Furthermore, research comparing Polish and foreign creators of commemorative murals could be of research interest.

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Adrianna Krzywik

The Maria Grzegorzewska University. Institute of Philosophy and Sociology

aksd9@aps.edu.pl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7261-8606>

PhD candidate at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education in Warsaw.

Her research interests are related to artistic activities in public space. Analyses the social functioning of street art, memory carriers and social movements.