

# THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE STICKY

## EVERYDAY AESTHETICS AND THE ETHICS OF STICKER ART

Many artists have a preferred medium for their work. For Clet Abraham – an artist who refers to himself simply as “Clet” - this happens to be public street signs. Clet uses vinyl stickers to alter the appearances of traffic signs around the world, all in an effort to render them art. For instance, instead of a sign commanding you not to enter a given road, drivers see, courtesy of Clet, a sign stickered with a hunched-over figure that perhaps makes one think of the weight that traffic signs (and laws in general) exert on us. This practice of *sticker art* is becoming more common with many lesser-known artists finding it to be an inexpensive and expressive way to gain exposure and renown in artistic circles. While this has the potential to facilitate access to those seeking entrance into the art scene and to enable new ways of being creative in everyday life, it also raises important ethical dilemmas.



Breaking into the artworld without breaking the bank is difficult, if not impossible. Being an artist takes skill, time, and, too often, resources to capture attention. It frequently takes connections and a decent amount of money for any artist to get noticed. The prestige of the artworld makes it hard for those who are just beginning their career or who simply do not have the means necessary to burst into the art scene. Many believe sticker art to be a useful new practice because it resists such elitism. Cheap to make, easy to apply, and simple to design, stickers allow artists to remain expressive but also to practice their art in a range of public locations. They can also replicate works of art, given that many traffic signs are similar across nations and continents. To many, stickers have a way of transcending from a piece of vinyl to a zealous political statement, a unique form of advertising, or a branded art piece. Andy Singer from streets.mn describes the distinctive ability stickers themselves have to spread a message among sticker artists: “Sticker artists often trade their work with each other in order to expand distribution. An artist’s stickers may be distributed worldwide and end up in places the artist has never been to” (Singer, 2016). Thus, sticker art can become a form of art that is distanced from the originator of the sticker to be used, or from the artist who first used that sticker on a type of traffic sign.



With the growth of sticker art in the mainstream media has come a growth of display methods. Like traditional art forms, sticker art can be found in magazines, book collections, and even art exhibits. Many consider sticker art to be an



untraditional form of street art. Other forms of street art such as graffiti, poster art, sculptures, and street installations are consistently praised in the art community, regardless of the ethical flaws they may present. Like many trends in modern art, sticker art's specialty is in remixing various parts from popular culture or in reframing the commonplace. It finds its originality in its patterns of replication across various traffic signs, and it attempts to place the aesthetic in the everyday world. Instead of a sign that simply conveys habitualized traffic behaviors, a stickered sign becomes something unique and special in the everyday path of a traveler.

Both street art and sticker art are considered as illegal vandalism by some critics. The practices have nonetheless produced artists who have grown to be household names, such as Banksy and Tavar Zawacki. Stickers also have the ability to go "viral" worldwide and have done so long before the invention of viral videos and the internet. This is the case with Shepard Fairey, who began his art career with the "Andre the Giant has a Posse" sticker campaign when he was still just a student in a school of design. His political pieces became a worldwide phenomenon with fans copying his works and placing them throughout the world.

Although many praise sticker arts for its ability to elevate an artist's status and spread messages that are significant to current society, others worry about the ethical problems that sticker art raises. The stickers used can cover up or alter important traffic signs. These signs are relied on by those driving or even walking by to ensure the safety of everyone involved. Even if they add an artistic meaning to commonly viewed signs, they may accomplish this by distracting from the pragmatic meaning of these signs as traffic and safety guides. Many would argue that art cannot be as valuable if it causes harm to others, and, in the case of sticker art, it could be argued that the potential for physical harm to the public far outweighs the addition to the art world.

The legality of sticker art is also often debated. While in some situations sticker art could be considered only littering (which incurs rather minor penalties), it could also be considered an act of vandalism, which has much harsher penalties such as jail time. Vandalism is an act that has multiple ethical consequences and extends the conversation over sticker art on public and private property in new ways. According to some studies, vandalism can cost \$1-3 per taxpayer in the United States, and Christopher Raines explains the cost of vandalism to local business owners by stating, "Business owners pay -- directly and indirectly -- for vandalism, which consists of the defacing or damaging of property. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, a single incident of vandalism costs on average \$3,370" (Raines). While sticker art may not account for the most extremely damaging forms of vandalism or property alteration, it still costs someone money to return things back to a "pre-stickered" form. Some might not agree that stickers improve traffic signs, park benches, or the outside of stores, for instance, thereby questioning the aesthetic value that such a practice provides to the community.

There's no doubt about it: sticker art brings considerations and practices of the artworld into the everyday world we walk and drive through in our cities. But how are communities to weigh the aesthetic benefits of sticker art against its various costs and tradeoffs?

## Discussion Questions:

1. Is the design of stickers for use in sticker art an art form? Is the practice of applying them to signs and public spaces an artform? What characteristics make it so?
2. Does the practice of sticker art become less aesthetically innovative if one applies the stickers designed by another artist? What about if one applies them to signs in the same way that another artist did at an earlier time?
3. Why is sticker art aesthetically valuable? Does the potential for harm to the public outweigh the aesthetic benefits of the stickers?
4. Is the aesthetic value of sticker art compromised if they are used for advertising purposes?

## Further Information:

Kai, Tiana, " COFFEE WITH CLET, AN INTIMATE INTERVIEW WITH FRENCH STREET ARTIST." *Tiana Kai*. Available at: <http://tianakai.com/2015/01/clet-abraham-french-artist-in-florence/>

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Raines, Christopher, " What Can Vandalism Cost a Business?" *Chron*. Available at: <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/can-vandalism-cost-business-63820.html>

Fairey, Shepard, " Sticker Art." *Graphotism Magazine*, May 2003. Available at: <https://obeygiant.com/essays/sticker-art/>

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