



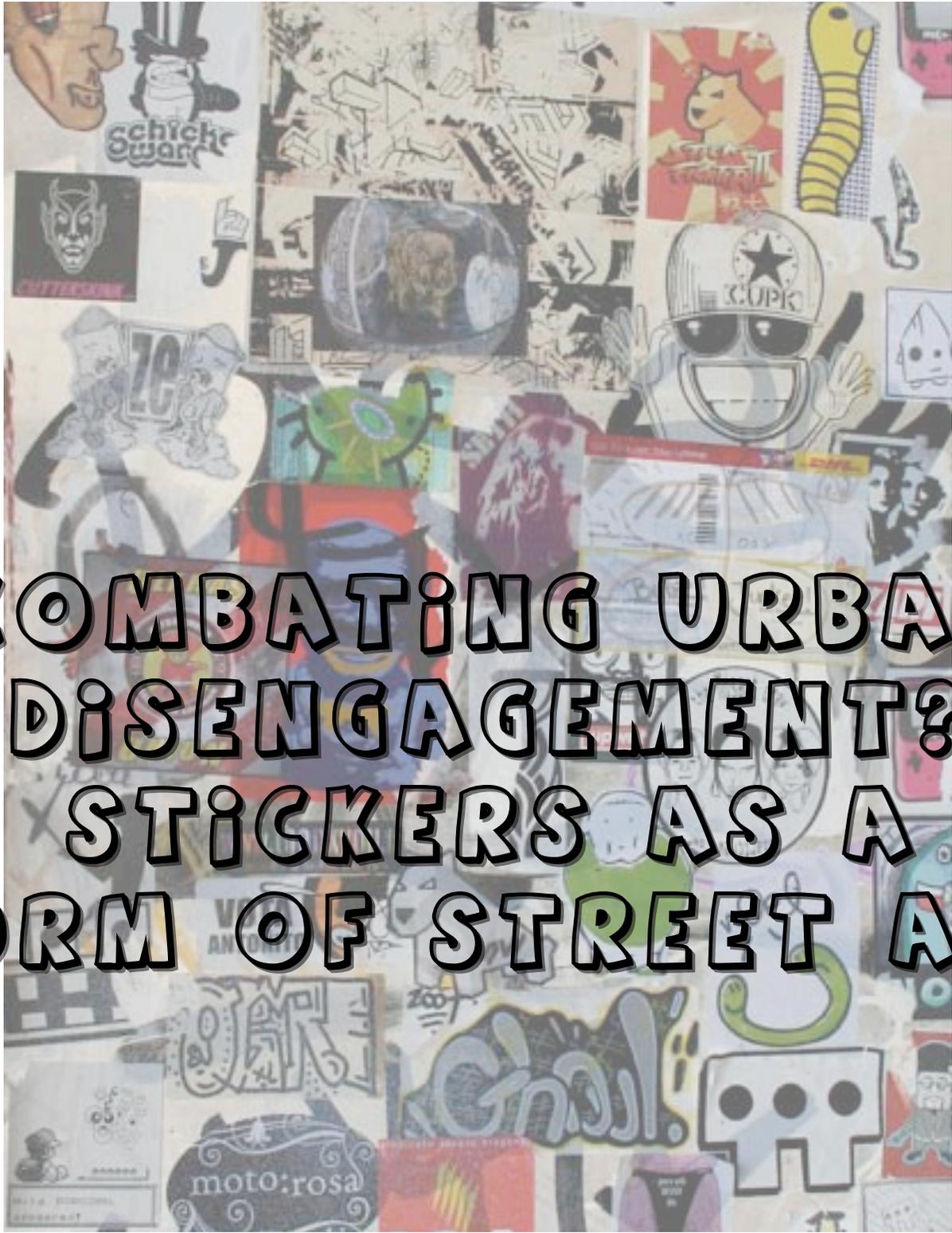
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**COMBATING URBAN
DISENGAGEMENT?
STICKERS AS A FORM
OF STREET ART**

Working Paper No. 09/2011



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Abstract

Stickers form a category of street art that is becoming increasingly popular in modern, industrial urban environments. By exploiting the material properties of stickers, street artists are able to spread their work over large areas with little effort. Sticker designs are shared using the Internet, forming global networks of trade and exchange; they are also collected – an activity also enabled by their material properties – which allows individuals to re-establish meaningful relationships with material forms. A four-week fieldwork period in Berlin provided the opportunity to investigate the inner workings of the street art genre, from the perspective of their role in relation to other forms of visual media like corporate advertising. Sticker art is proven to occupy an unexpected position, incorporating aspects of both anti-capitalist and capitalist methods and ideologies. It also has important implications for the future development of the street art subculture, as it raises issues of popularisation, dislocation, and the subsequent stagnation of street art in Berlin.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my dissertation supervisor, Susanne Kuechler, for her advice and guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank all the sticker artists, traders and enthusiasts who provided me with interviews or otherwise gave me advice regarding this project – their contributions have been invaluable¹. Lastly I would like to thank Oli, for his overwhelming enthusiasm and support from the moment I first made contact. He welcomed me into his world and went to great trouble to make me feel part of Hatch. This project would not exist if it weren't for his help, and for that I am truly grateful. I hope I have done justice to Hatch and to the intricacies of the ever expanding, ever evolving sticker culture.

This paper has been developed from research carried out in the Department of Anthropology, UCL as part of the MA Material and Visual Culture.

¹ Full transcriptions of all the interviews I carried out are available in a supporting document available from UCL Department of Anthropology.

Preface

I have always been interested in street art. It represents what is, for me, a magical combination of sub-cultural diversity, art, and landscape. It is pure expression – unadulterated by curators, by the gallery setting, or by the conditioned responses of the gallery-going public. Street art is confrontational. And most importantly, it is made by normal people – us – the real living, breathing bodies inhabiting today's urban spaces.

In Spring 2010 I decided I wanted to do a project about street art. A friend had just finished a project on the same subject, and I spoke to him about my ideas: I was fascinated by the ways street artists create visual discourse through their work, inviting interpretation or response from others, and creating vast pictorial conversations on urban surfaces. I was about to launch into the reasons why I felt it was so important to study this phenomenon, when I was stopped in my tracks:

“Have you ever thought about stickers?”

I frowned. The truth was, I hadn't. In fact I'd never really noticed them. That evening on my way home I directed my gaze upwards, intent on spotting one of these elusive stickers. I was staggered at what I found: stickers were present on almost every single surface I studied, including bus stops, street signs, traffic lights, drainpipes and dustbins. Not only were they present - frequently they were present in large clusters. How had I, a street art follower, never noticed them before?

After that I adopted a 'tourist gaze', altering my physical movements to make sure I spotted every single one. I wanted to know who was making these stickers, and who took notice of them. About a month later I made a website – www.thestickerproject.co.uk – and I made my own stickers with this address on them. The website gives a short introduction, assures visitors I'm not an undercover member of the police force, and asks them to get in touch using a contact form: I wanted people to talk to me about the role stickers play in their lives, and what better way to get their attention than with stickers themselves?

Under cover of darkness, accompanied by a friend, I plastered my stickers all over town. I worked late into the night, placing them near others in the hopes that artists might notice a new addition when passing, and considering which places were seen easiest from the pavement. After all my hard work, I sat back and waited for the emails to roll in.

I didn't receive a single email. I set up an analytics service for the website which told me just a handful of people had visited it – probably, I guessed, the small circle of friends I'd told about the project. I was therefore unable to console myself with the thought that people had looked at my website but weren't willing to get in touch. Perhaps people took notice of my stickers but weren't curious about the website – perhaps it was the plain black and white design of my stickers which let me down. Or, perhaps nobody noticed them at all. Despite the overwhelming lack of response to my stickers, I was determined to unravel the inner working of this in-your-face yet surprisingly mysterious form of street art.

Chapter 1 – An Introduction to Sticker Art

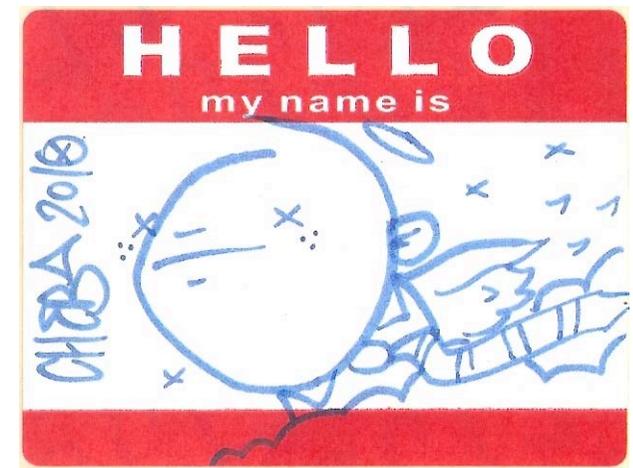
In the last two decades street art activities have risen to the forefront of public awareness. The 'street art' genre, generally speaking, subsumes spray painting, stencils, paste-ups, and adhesive art², which can be termed more simply as *stickers*.

Adhesive formats first became popular in an artistic context at the beginning of the 20th century with the Dadaists (Walde 2007: 20). "By the mid-century individuals and groups were beginning to use posters in protest against the ubiquitous advertising campaigns that were pervading public spaces" - a protest which would continue right up to the present day (ibid). "Street artists proclaim urban buildings covered by ads and other commercial stimuli violate the spirit of the law by imposing the market ideology upon city dwellers" (Banksy 2006).

² It is worth noting, however, that under the pressure of ever-tightening legal restrictions a large variety of new, innovative forms of street art are emerging. These include tape art, moss art, and art made by pressure-washing dirty urban surfaces.

Stickers were first used as street art in the form of "Hello, My Name Is" stickers (Fig. 1), which have been in existence since the 1960's, and which were originally worn by couriers and people in discussion groups and seminars (Cooper 2010; Walde 2007). Over time they became used as a tool for members of the street art community to introduce themselves - artists would simply tag a sticker and put it up in the street.

Figure 1: A Hello My Name Is sticker by Bristol-based street artist Cheba (Author's own)



This method of tagging has clear advantages - the simple, quick action of putting up a sticker is inconspicuous and therefore carries much less risk than other

forms of street art. Artists can prepare hundreds of stickers in the comfort of their own home, and carry some around in their pocket at all times. These factors mean it is also possible to cover a larger area in less time, and to work in daylight. They also mean, however, that sticker art is sometimes seen as a more subordinate or passive form of street art, as it removes both the intimate physical relationship with the urban landscape - the walls, the obstacles that need to be climbed over, the hard surfaces that are drawn on - and it removes the element of risk which has traditionally been crucial to earning respect and recognition within the scene³.

American artists TWIST, COST and REVS were very influential in making the sticker a popular medium (Cooper 2010: 6). After that, stickers became popular outside of the USA, and the trend soon went global.

Free postal stickers (Fig. 2) from national post offices and delivery companies became a hugely popular material, because they were easy to get hold of, didn't cost anything, and provided a large area for drawing or painting on.



Figure 2: An El Bocho postal sticker (Author's own)

³ See Schacter (2005) for a discussion of the performative nature of graffiti production.

Artists would also collect free advertising stickers from shops or distributors and paint over them before applying their own design. This was not only a cheap way of 'getting up'⁴, but it also functioned as a way of reducing the amount of advertising images being circulated, thus supporting the anti-establishment ethos of the street art genre.

Since then, technological advances have made home computers, printers and the Internet widely available, making it easy to create stickers at home (Walde 2007: 9). "The internet has enabled like-minded individuals around the globe to pool ideas and access the latest trends", plus software like Adobe Photoshop and Corel Draw allow amateurs to produce high quality professional-looking graphics (ibid). The sticker format has therefore *opened up* the previously small and elitist street art scene.

Although they both encapsulate a subculture (and are therefore fundamentally exclusive in nature), street art forms are generally understood to be more inclusive of the viewing public than graffiti, because

⁴ 'Getting up' is a term used in the street art scene to describe the act of putting up a piece of street art. Artists who work specifically with stickers may also use the term 'bomb' or 'sticker bomb' to describe the act of putting up a sticker. Another notable term is 'toy' which is used negatively to denote a low quality or unskilled piece of graffiti or street art.

they have a more pictorial basis. Graffiti is generally made up of highly stylised and codified tags that can be difficult to read and understand⁵. Within street art stickers are a particularly pictorial medium, as their small size necessitates quick and easy comprehension. Stickers therefore act as a more democratic form of street art, allowing all kinds of people to feel "integrated, have an instant connection with the motifs, and ... make interpretations of their own" (Walde 2007: 68). The latter is incredibly important - a piece of street art which invites interpretation from the public will make them feel included in this otherwise secretive and potentially alienating activity which takes place in *their* city.

Entire blogs have been set up devoted to sticker culture⁶, with artists and enthusiasts around the world photographing and sharing their own work as well as any other interesting or unusual stickers they see on the street.

This culture of sharing, unique within the street art genre, allows mixing of ideas, and eventually leads to style formation, forming a global body of

⁵ I could spend a long time here outlining the difference between street art and graffiti – some argue that it is purely a case of semantics, while others argue that there are clearly defined cultural differences. I do not wish to enter into this debate here, but simply to indicate a perceived difference and draw attention to the fact that a large proportion of street art is pictorial in nature.

⁶ See for example www.streetartstickers.com and www.bomit.com

street art stickers which mock, interpret, sample and reference each other.

"It's like music ... we live in an age of sampling. It's no longer difficult to recycle existing objects, and everybody does it" (Dan Witz in Walde 2007: 51).

As sticker culture developed, artists made larger batches by experimenting with techniques like screen-printing, or by sending their designs to professional sticker manufacturers to be printed using high quality inks and papers. Today street art stickers are found in a number of forms. Broadly speaking, however, it is possible to identify the following categories (Figs. 3-6):

- Graffiti tags hand written on stickers
- Hand-drawn characters and images on stickers
- Hand-printed characters and images on stickers
- Machine printed characters and images on stickers

A small preliminary survey of stickers on my local high street in May-June 2010 revealed that they aren't subject to the same quick cycle of removal and replacement that affects other, larger scale forms of street art. This could indicate that they don't incite the same feelings of threat or anger in

the general public as other forms of street art, or that local councils are less concerned about the sticker phenomenon at this relatively early stage in its development. Perhaps it is because a sticker can be classified as a non-threatening household object, an item we play with as youngsters and which therefore seems innocent or harmless to us.



Figures 3-6: Ash tag hand written; Bean character drawing; Tower hand printed; Peach Beach machine printed (Author's own)

Perhaps we simply don't see stickers. As I have approached this project I have discussed sticker art with many people. These people coexist with

stickers every day, but most were totally unaware of their existence until I pointed it out. Stickers don't seem to figure on the radar of the general public, let alone the local authorities. If this is the case however, what role do stickers play in our environment? Why do artists keep making them and putting them up in public places?

Initial research suggests that this is the first academic investigation of stickers as a form of street art. The aim of this project is therefore first and foremost to explore the genres' dynamics and networks of social relations. The next chapter will first situate sticker culture in the broad context of the modern urban landscape, thinking about both sticker art on the streets and sticker collecting as fundamentally social practices. The investigation will then adopt a 'bottom-up' approach, using fieldwork carried out in Berlin as a basis for unfolding the complexities of sticker culture.

Chapter 2 – The Disengaged Person

"It is people who are engaged with their surroundings in material and practical ways who have a meaningful and consequential relationship with their environs." (Carrier 2003: 5)

Escobar et al define 'Capitalist nature' as "the objectification of 'nature' linked to the spread of patriarchal capitalism and the commodity form" (1999: 7). The natural environment becomes a distant phenomenon, "a realm to be apprehended through the frame of capitalist rationality and control" (ibid). 'Nature' becomes a sort of consumable, in the sense that today's urbanites may escape the city for a weekend break or go to the park specifically with the purpose of experiencing or absorbing it, and 'natural' or organic food, toiletries and other products are favoured over synthetic or mass-produced ones. Capitalism has broadly been associated with an increase in alienation within urban environments (see for example Sennett 1976); because people living in cities are rarely able to maintain an active or prolonged relationship with the physical environment, modern industrial society is increasingly "characterised by the disengaged person" (Carrier 2003: 6).

The environment is viewed as abstract and altogether separate from the individual, in opposition to the phenomenological view that we are in fact constituted by it. Phenomenological understandings of environment argue that we are formed and influenced by our material experiences of being-in-the-world. The body is subjective, and consciousness arises from its physical experience of the material world⁷.

As Carrier notes, it is important that we do not assume people are disengaged simply because modern urbanites do not have 'dirt under their fingernails'. A practical engagement can manifest itself in a multitude of ways, and "behind the gazing eye is the thinking and affecting mind" (2003: 18). It is however possible to differentiate between a practical and an intellectualised relationship with our environs - my own 'urban disengagement' became apparent to me when I realised how many stickers inhabited the very street I live on, but which I had never even

⁷ For further discussion of phenomenological approaches to landscape and the body, see TILLEY (2004); MERLEAU-PONTY (1962); INGOLD'S 'dwelling perspective' (2000: 172); and BENDER (2001).

seen. The key to a meaningful relationship with one's environment seems to lie in *experience* - participation and acknowledgement. The alienation Carrier speaks of is almost suggestive of a lack of understanding or comprehension of the physical landscape, a feeling of threat, or of isolation in a world which is increasingly technological and depersonalised.

Perhaps the act of putting up a sticker can be interpreted as a way of attempting to forge links or prompt interactions in this otherwise rather isolated world. Shepard Fairey states that by putting up stickers he makes his world feel a little smaller (2003), and presumably therefore more manageable and less externalised. By putting something into the world he can call his own, Fairey demonstrates firsthand a 'way of worldmaking' - a way of re-establishing oneself as a person with an identity and a right to inhabit the world both overtly and visually (after Goodman 1978). We use visual media as a tool to reach out and touch other people, to grab their attention and try to invoke a response.

In street art it is possible to see the effects of these visual olive branches, as artworks attract other artworks and whole streets or walls of buildings open out into arenas for pictorial discourse and dialogue. Street art

orientated research conducted by Visconti et al suggests that the consumption of public space in urban environments is currently "dissatisfying", but that "through the agency of artists and dwellers... this unsatisfying experience can be rehabilitated" (2010: 512). Street art functions as a way of "*communicating* this alienation, a way of *suggesting* other modes of appreciating and accessing urban life, and a fresh means of *participating* in the city and *engaging* with the environment" (Schacter 2005: 48).

Mitchell writes "images have a kind of social or psychological power of their own" (2005: 32). He discusses the 'fertility' of images - their ability to reproduce in their millions, and their colonisation of modern urban society, which is almost biological or even viral (ibid: 86-87). Freedberg talks of the dangers of emotional involvement that springs from sight. Visual media have the power to refigure our perceptions; and particularly if we think about the actively negotiated arena of street art, we can imagine images forming a "social collective that has a parallel existence to the social life of their human hosts" (Mitchell 2005: 93).

Debord (1967) saw society as becoming increasingly conditioned by visual media, and he understood this as a profoundly negative process. If social perception is controlled by the mass media, Debord anticipated that we would end up with "the projection of society as mere image or spectacle" (in Martin 1999: 17). If economic life predominates over social life, having or *possessing* predominates over social *being*, and image and presentation become paramount values (Debord 1967, 1983). In sum, Debord was pointing to a general loss of depth in contemporary society, coupled with a disproportionate social focus on getting and owning.

Conspicuous consumption is an example of Debord's theory, and it relates to Gregory's concept of *alienability* (1982). Commodity exchanges (i.e. the exchanges involved in conspicuous consumption) establish a relationship between the *goods* exchanged, whereas gift exchange creates a relationship between the *people* making the transaction (1982: 41, also Strathern 1990: 143, and Mauss 1969). If an economy is commodity-orientated, people therefore focus on the appropriation of goods, and objects are alienable. That is, goods can be alienated from their manufacturer or owner without encountering networks of social relations. Even items that are a product of a person's own labour are alienable, and

ownership of an item only really equates to "control over the conditions of its alienation" (ibid: 162).

Collecting stands in opposition to conspicuous consumption and commodity exchange. It involves the gathering of objects with the sole aim of making them *inalienable*, by assigning social and emotional meaning to each one. We can therefore see collecting as a practice, like street art, that may emerge within an increasingly disengaged society. Collecting "challenges the idea of a 'disposable' society, where we only have fleeting attachments to things" (Belk 1995: 66). Objects chosen for collections (like stickers or stamps) are often immune from "fashion obsolescence" and can therefore provide a source of stability and calm in an otherwise hectic world of objects with rapid turnover and high rates of consumption (ibid).

Just like Fairey's stickering, collecting may provide a sense of control, of mastery, of having one's own little world. The act of collecting provides reassurance and 'social equilibrium' when "socio-economic forces threaten to destabilise them" (Martin 1991: 1). Collectors may therefore use objects like stickers to construct alternative worlds or identities as a means of coping with social change.

Stickers are probably the only form of street art that is easily collectable in its material form, due to its small size and portability. It is also possible to think of sticker blogging as a form of collecting. People photograph stickers on the street and create vast image portfolios on the Internet⁸, which they then share with others. These individuals use photographs as a way of collecting not only images but also their *experiences*, in tangible form. The act of sharing these photographs online authenticates or *validates* the photographers' experiences, and may function to strengthen their sense of identity or belonging within a virtually constructed network of social relations.

The practice of trading and sharing stickers - which takes place to a large extent online - equates to Gregory's gift exchange (1982). Within a gift economy, people can "only dispose of items by enchain[ing] themselves in relations with others" (Strathern 1990: 161). This is certainly the case if stickers are being put up in the street – an act that inevitably reaches out and touches others. Similarly, stickers that have been collected will each have an individual life history; perhaps the collector will have a personal

⁸ See for example urbanartcore.eu's Flickr.com photostream at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/streetart-berlin/> - Accessed 07/09/10

relationship with the artist, or it might even be the artist who is trading their work. In this context stickers become inalienable, in the sense that they cannot be removed from the network of social relations into which they have been subsumed. Many of these social relations are created through an online medium which necessarily alters our conceptions and understandings of sociality – the parties exchanging may never meet each other, they may only know each other as an email address or virtual persona. It is therefore a form of gift exchange in which the social relations are dislocated, made real with the help of a virtual landscape complementing the physical.

In a gift exchange situation, stickers may represent the distributed personhood of their originator, in the literal sense of Strathern (1990), or in the agentic sense of Gell (1998). Strathern's extensive fieldwork in Melanesia led her to the discovery of the *dividual* person, who is plural, additive, and cumulative. They are a "composite site of the relationships that produced them" (Strathern 1990: 13). They are also said to be physically and tangibly present or materialised in products that they manufacture or exchange, because their actions *extend* them (see also Wagner 1972). So a sticker artist will always be physically evident or

residual in the stickers they trade or share with others. Gell (1998) writes of the multitude of ways social agency can be invested in material objects. Using his terms, fragments of 'primary' social agents (i.e. individuals) are manifested in 'secondary' material objects, in a process known as objectification (Gell 1998: 21). Schacter argues that it is the images' "agency and embodiment, imposed by street artists and interiorised by their viewing subjects" that makes street art so effective at inciting passion (2005: 12).

Sticker culture, like any other subculture, is structured around basic principles of inclusion or exclusion. Those *included* in the sticker subculture become part of a community. Stickers provide a democratic medium, available to all, allowing individuals from all walks of life to experiment with creating small, risk-free pieces of street art⁹. By putting a sticker in a public place, an individual may feel like they are making a stand or staking a claim to the urban environment, which is rightfully theirs to experience and attach meaning to. Collectors and bloggers use stickers and photographs

⁹ Much more could be written here on the contradiction that emerges between stickers as part of a subculture, and stickers as a democratic medium. One is fundamentally exclusive, while the other is inclusive. Stickers inhabit a tense position, straddling the line between subculture and popular media.

to authenticate and validate their personal experiences, creating a sense of purpose and belonging. Sticker traders create networks of meaningful relationships by interacting and exchanging with fellow enthusiasts. All of these individuals are experimenting with 'ways of worldmaking' (Goodman 1978).

In contrast, those *excluded* from the subculture rarely notice sticker art despite the fact that, in most cases, it is present in ever-increasing quantities throughout urban environments around the world. For these individuals, sticker art is blocked out; perhaps it becomes one of the many kinds of visual media that registers in their peripheral vision, but which is not investigated any further. In these situations, sticker art could potentially even *contribute* to feelings of disengagement, by simply adding another layer to the cacophony of images which covers urban architecture. They may also be unable to decipher sticker culture's overt yet codified communications, further adding to feelings of alienation.

The increasing disengagement and alienation experienced by those inhabiting modern, industrial, capitalist societies is an issue fundamental to the evolution of a vast and multi-faceted street art culture around the world.

The use of stickers as a form of street art and the act of creating a sticker collection are both activities which, albeit often subconsciously, aim to counteract these negative urban effects, and to create meaningful social networks and relationships. Stickers provide an antidote to the alienation and disengagement experienced by today's urban dwellers.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

When I decided to do a project about stickers I walked around my hometown looking at all the different kinds. I noticed a number of hand-tagged stickers by an artist named Jazmag. I enjoyed the fact that, within a very small area, I could walk around and effectively track the movements of this individual. After a few weeks of doing this I felt that I was able to notice a progression in their skill, the confidence of their writing, and the creativity of their designs.

I started by thinking about how this sticker – essentially a more efficient way of tagging – related to the kinds of online communities that have built up around sticker culture. Groups, blogs and websites have been set up to enable quick and easy sticker trading and distribution, as well as the sharing of ideas and contacts. Next I carried out structured interviews over email. I received valuable responses from Falk (*Fluctibus* campaign), artist *Okkle*, and with US-based sticker distribution business Sticker Drop, as well as with the Cambridge-based political activists behind the infamous ‘Bollocks’ sticker (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: Tom and Andy's 'Bollocks' sticker (Author's own)

My next aim was to meet up with one or more UK-based street artists in person, to try to spend time with them on a daily or weekly basis. Despite persistent attempts, however, my research was met with little interest. The artists were either suspicious of my intentions, or, significantly, they didn't seem to think stickers were worth talking about¹⁰. I got the distinct impression that a project *all about* stickers seemed a bit of a waste of time for the artists in question. I widened my search, and soon made contact with Oli – director of Berlin-based sticker museum and gallery, Hatch. Not

¹⁰ See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the perception of stickers within the street art scene. Often they are understood as an inferior art form, or as an extra in an artist's repertoire, rather than their main focus.

only did he invite me to visit and carry out research at Hatch, he also enthusiastically offered to help me set up interviews with Berlin street artists.

I spent a total of four weeks in Berlin, during which I carried out semi-structured interviews with four local sticker artists with very different artistic backgrounds and interests: *Noel*, *Tower*, *Lukas (Undenk Crew¹¹)* and *Haevi*. I asked them questions about how they first became involved in sticker culture, how the materiality of stickers affected their street art activities, whether or not they distribute their stickers, and whether or not they felt they used their stickers to try to communicate a message¹².

The rest of my research was carried out during 4 days a week participant observation in Hatch. Here I made a daily diary and learned about the history and contents of the sticker collection. I also took the opportunity to photograph all the stickers made by my interviewees, so I could take a

¹¹ A 'crew' is a loosely organised group of artists who all go under the same crew name.

¹² The full transcriptions of these interviews can be found in a separate supporting document which accompanies this thesis.

closer look at their artistic styles and think about the ways they created a visual identity for themselves or their street art persona¹³.

Every day during my fieldwork I photographed changes to the sticker 'landscape' on Dirschauer Straße, the street on which Hatch is located. I logged these photographs onto Google Maps, creating an interactive map where it was possible to see the changing face of the stickers on this particular street¹⁴. Contrary to my expectations, there were as many sticker *removals* as there were additions, and many of these took place overnight in what seemed like individual acts of 'cleaning up'. Notably, these removals were not done by professionals, as was evidenced by the scrape marks and ripped edges of stickers left over¹⁵.

By this point I had become increasingly interested in the groupings of stickers in the environment, on specific pieces of urban architecture or 'furniture' like lampposts and street signs. The way stickers attracted each

¹³ See chapter 4, sections 2-5 for examples of the stickers made by these artists

¹⁴ This map can be found at:

<http://maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&msid=116065954153418269088.00048b56bd9eb38a57401&z=16>

¹⁵ Unfortunately it was not possible within the scope of this study to fully research the phenomenon of sticker removal in Berlin. For further information on the subject of graffiti removal and iconoclasm, see Schacter (2005)

other seemed to result in seemingly planned artistic compositions. At one such cluster, on Libauer Straße in Friedrichshain, I visited and took photographs every day over a 7-day period. I wanted to see if any changes took place or if any new stickers were added over this period, and if so how they were placed in relation to the rest of the cluster.

I carried out an identical photographic survey over a 7-day period at a much larger cluster of stickers on a metal wall surface at Kottbusser Tor, Kreuzberg. Oli pointed out this site to me. He hadn't visited for a while, however, and when I arrived a large graffiti tag had obscured much of the wall space (Fig. 8). No changes whatsoever took place at this particular sticker cluster during my study, suggesting that the disturbance of the graffiti tag had somehow changed the dynamic of the discourse being played out at this site¹⁶.

¹⁶ Notably, in Berlin it seemed to be poor form to cover over a sticker. Usually, as they are so small, it isn't necessary to obscure anybody else's work when putting them up – a trait that perhaps contributes to the creation of discourse, rather than the development of a culture of one-upmanship which is evident with graffiti tagging. Within the graffiti scene it is common for artists to cover over each other's designs, either if they have been up for what is perceived as a reasonable amount of time, or if they are judged to be of a low quality. A common technique is to write 'Toy' on top of low quality or particularly contentious graffiti writing as a derogatory term.

As part of my fieldwork I also wanted to further my understanding of the actual physical process of putting up a sticker. I printed out four identical colour stickers using my inkjet printer. Two were printed on standard sticker paper, and two were printed onto glossy vinyl. I put one of each material up on the side of the window in my apartment, on the plasterwork; I also put one of each on a drainpipe outside Hatch. I photographed them everyday to see the effects of time, weather, and other external forces such as purposeful removal. The resulting photographic log can be found in chapter 4, section 8.



*Figure 8: The graffiti tag that dominated the sticker wall at Kottbusser Tor
(Author's own)*

I also visited relevant street art exhibitions in galleries. These included the Papergirl exhibition at Neurotitan; Peach Beach solo show at the West Berlin Gallery; permanent exhibition at the Circle

Culture Gallery; Dash3Ultra and Mittenimwald at ATM Gallery. I also attended the United Colours street art festival in association with ATM Gallery, including screenings of films Beautiful Losers; Public Discourse; and One Week With The Wa.

Chapter 4 – Data

NB: All photographs in this chapter were taken by the author unless otherwise stated.

Section 1: HATCH Sticker Gallery & Museum

Hatch sticker museum and gallery is the only project of its kind, dedicated entirely to sticker culture, in the world (Fig. 9). Hatch has been open for two and a half years. It was founded and continues to be run and directed by a single man, Oli. For him, Hatch is a labour of love: he does not receive a wage for his work, and runs the project entirely from small donations from visitors and from his online mail-order service¹⁷. Online customers can buy specific branded stickers in various quantities, from a selection of 600+ stickers individual sticker designs, from 130 different brands – it is the processing of these orders which takes up most of Oli’s working day. The rest of the time he spends greeting visitors, looking for ways to expand the project, and trying to keep Hatch afloat. Oli also sells sticker packs, t-shirts and artworks by local sticker artists in the gallery space, however *all* the proceeds from these sales go either straight back to the artist or to charity:

¹⁷ See www.hatchkingdom.com (Accessed 10/09/10)

Oli’s main aim with the project is to *support* local artists and the sticker scene.



Figure 9: Hatch (Author’s own)

Hatch is located on Dirschauer Straße in Friedrichshain, an area which until the fall of the Berlin wall remained badly damaged from World War II. Since then the area has seen a steady growth in investment and popularity, and today it is home to numerous expensive, fashionable shops and cafes. At its south end Dirschauer Straße connects to Revaler Straße, which is renowned for the so-called RAW area. This former industrial area is home to cafes, nightclubs, a skate park, a climbing centre, and numerous disused buildings that are famously covered top to bottom with street art and graffiti (Fig. 10). This area attracts large numbers of young people and tourists. The Alternative Berlin Tour runs twice a day every day, and leads groups of tourists around some of Berlin's most infamous street art locations, as well as galleries including Hatch.

The space at Hatch comprises of two main rooms. In the first room visitors can browse sticker-related publications, t-shirts designed and printed by local street artists, and sticker packs by artists including *Tower*, *Steckdose*, and *Der Herr und Sein Knecht*. The walls of this room are adorned with various sticker collages, as well as a large floor-to-ceiling space where visitors can put their own sticker (Fig. 11).



Figure 10: Mural by Base23 and Roa at RAW (Author's own)



Figure 11: The visitors' sticker wall at Hatch (Author's own)

The second room is covered floor to ceiling with large picture frames full of stickers (Figs. 12-14). Two walls are composed of branded stickers (from skate, music, graphic design, and clothing brands), and two walls are composed of stickers made by street artists from around the world.



Figures 12-14: Part of the sticker collection at Hatch (Author's own)

With limited space, Oli aims to present the most creative stickers to the public, or those which he deems the most significant for the development of the scene. Those which are duplications or very similar to other designs are likely to be stored in boxes rather than in the exhibition itself.

Around 5,000 stickers are on display at Hatch. Oli estimates, however, that his collection comprises more than 28,000 stickers. The rest are grouped according to the brand or artist who made them, and stored in boxes. Oli has been collecting stickers for 27 years. Before he collected stickers he collected bottle tops, and today as well as stickers he also collects vinyl toys (Fig. 15) – an increasingly popular commercial sideline for street artists.

Figure 15: "Mr. Spray" vinyl toy from Obey (image from www.obeygiant.com)



When Oli first opened Hatch the project was met with some concern from local artists, as it is sponsored by Carhartt (Oli, pers. comm.). The idea that Hatch carried corporate sponsorship, along with the common feeling that street art should be kept in the street rather than put on display in a gallery, meant that the first few months at Hatch were difficult: artists were

reluctant to be associated with it. Over time however, Oli has made good connections within the scene and gained peoples trust through his enthusiasm and commitment to the project. He insists that the aim of the project is to conserve a snapshot of this rapidly evolving subculture, rather than attempting to change or remove anything from it. Today artists and collectors from around the world send Oli stickers so they can be added to the collection. In return for their donations, they receive a photo of one or more of their stickers on display in the Hatch gallery, and the knowledge that around 200 tourists are viewing their sticker at Hatch every week.

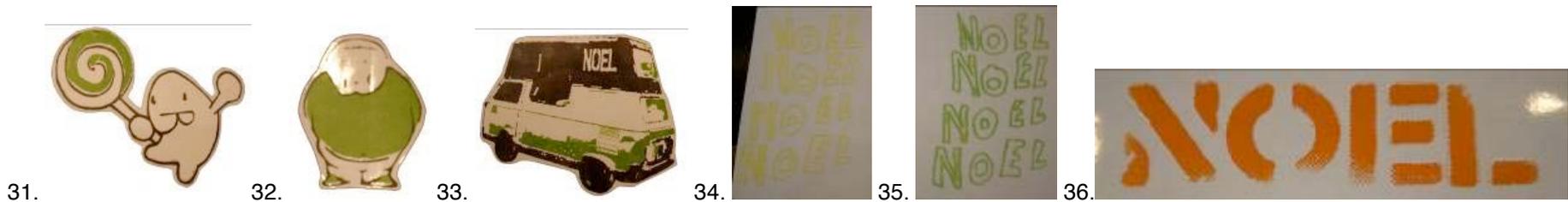
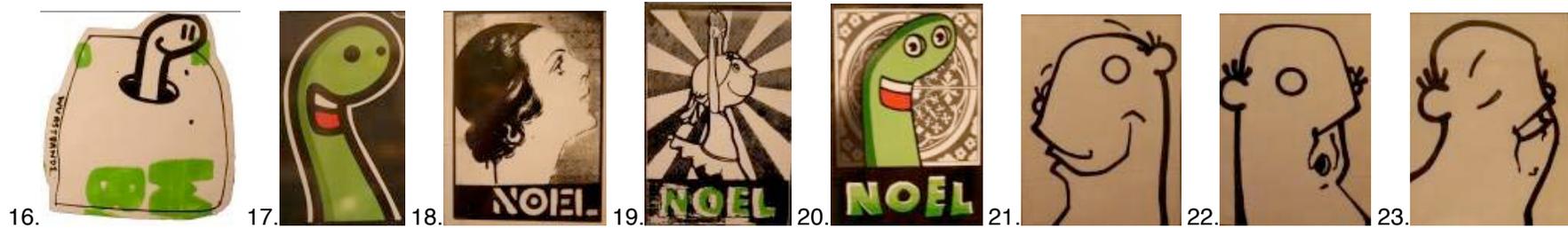
Oli told me that, in an ideal world, he would receive three of each sticker design. That way he can put one in the exhibition, one in the collection that isn't on display, and have one left over as backup in case either of the others is lost or damaged (pers. comm.). This is apparently standard collecting practice, and he noted that many people who buy stickers through his mail-order service would order three of each design (pers. comm.). The practice is perhaps indicative of the collector's need to keep hold of the things he acquires – having attained a new piece and assigned it personal meaning and value; its loss would be incredibly difficult. It would alter the dynamic of the whole collection – its absence may be painfully

evident, and even if more of the same design were available it may become irreplaceable, almost like losing a friend.

Oli occasionally sends small sample packs to international enthusiasts who request them. It takes a considerable amount of time to locate stickers by the brands these individuals had mentioned, and when asked why he does it Oli replied he “understands what it's like to be a collector” (pers. comm.). As a particularly successful collector Oli therefore feels a responsibility to help those just starting out – he has duplicates which he can spare, and he is happy to share them with other like-minded people. His generosity stems from the enjoyment of knowing that other people all around the world appreciate stickers as much as he does – the joy which comes with realising that there is a huge global community with whom he can share his passion. Life at Hatch isn't easy – Oli is constantly thinking about how he can make money to keep the project alive without compromising its ethos. Despite the hardships, however, Oli loves his job – during my time at Hatch he was always happiest when visitors spent a long time looking around, asking questions, and demonstrating a real appreciation and love for the stickers. He carries on for these moments.

Section 2: Stickers by NOEL

Noel is aged 21. He started making stickers at 15, and is most famous for the green worm character in stickers 16, 17, 20 and 29. He has just started a university degree studying design. When we spoke he was experimenting with a new form of street art – outdoors installations (pers. comm.).



Section 3: Stickers by TOWER

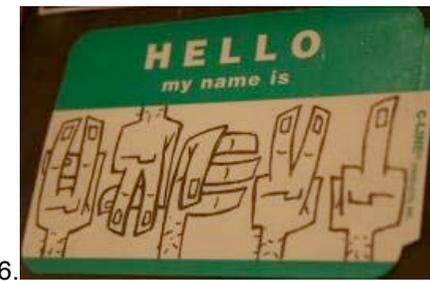
Tower is aged 30. As well as making stickers he works professionally as part of a successful Berlin-based art collective, doing commissions all around Europe.

Despite his professional success Tower is unlikely to stop making stickers – stickering is his addiction (pers. comm.).



Section 4: Stickers by HAEVI

Haevi is in his thirties, and he has a baby daughter and a stable job in engineering. He started making stickers just after the Berlin Wall fell in 1990, inspired by the work of graffiti artists from the former West Berlin (pers. comm.).



Section 5: Stickers by UNDENK CREW

Lukas is aged 24. He is a member of the mysterious *Undenk Crew* – a group of street artists united by common political beliefs. He also writes a street art column for a Berlin magazine (Lukas, pers. comm.). It is unknown exactly how many members the *Undenk Crew* has, and they have never all been in the same room with one another. They don't work like a lot of street art crews (i.e. collaboratively), but instead use the crew as a creative framework within which they can communicate their ideas more effectively (Lukas, pers. comm.).



78 (front & reverse).



79.



80.



81.



82.



83.

Section 6: Stickers by VANS

Vans was established in the USA in 1966, as a brand selling skate shoes. It has since cemented its place as one of the world's major skate brands, and has a long history of using stickers as a promotional medium (Oli, pers. comm.).



Section 7: Sticker Packs by CARHARTT

Carhartt was established in the USA in 1889. It is a family owned company, which is best known for selling work-wear. Today it is still worn on construction sites around the world, but in the 1990's *Carhartt* products also became popular in hip-hop culture. Since then it has developed a line of street-wear, which is popular within the entire street culture. They have a long history of producing promotional stickers, and in recent years have collaborated with numerous street artists, including *Five Deez* (Fig. 106) and *Elzo* (Fig. 108).



Section 8: Experimenting with paper and vinyl stickers

Location 1: Vinyl (top) and paper (bottom) stickers at my apartment, on plasterwork (Figure 110).



Location 2: Vinyl (top) and paper (bottom) stickers at Hatch, on a metal pipe (Figure 111).



The exposed position of the stickers at Hatch made them more vulnerable, both to weather and to people walking past. The vinyl sticker disappeared after a heavy rainstorm, and the paper sticker disappeared the next day. It is unknown whether they fell off naturally, or if they were peeled away by passers-by.

Chapter 5 - Materiality



Figure 112: A sticky definition at Hatch (Author's own)

The materiality of stickers promotes their use and affects the experience of encountering them in very specific ways. To really understand the dynamics of sticker culture it is therefore necessary to start at the bottom, at the basic level of what stickers *are*. Only then will it be possible to think about what they *do*.

Perhaps most significantly, the small *size* of stickers means they can be held in the palm of the hand, carried in multiples, and applied to urban surfaces with quick, subtle movements. Sticker artwork is usually prepared in advance - an aspect that *Haevi* feels enables him to produce higher quality handmade stickers (pers. comm.). One side of a sticker is covered in glue, so no other equipment is needed to put it up. The artist can simply remove the backing, make a quick movement, and the deed is done. Compare this to the paraphernalia needed for other kinds of street art (cans of spray paint, ladders, telescopic brushes, large bags to store stencils or paste-ups), and stickers start to look like a very attractive option, precisely because of their ease and convenience. When using

stickers artists have the option of working on the street in the daytime, rather than being forced into a potentially antisocial or exhausting nocturnal lifestyle. During our interview, *Haevi* noted that the speed and subtlety enabled by stickers allowed him to display his work in busy, heavily populated central areas where it would normally be impossible to make larger forms of street art (pers. comm.). Stickers therefore enable greater coverage and flexibility within an area due to the subtlety of their application. They also enable greater coverage on a national or international scale due to their small size and portability - they can be posted in standard envelopes at very low cost, or shared online; and they enable artists to cover more places in less time due to the speed of the whole 'bombing' process. Overall then, the use of stickers gives street artists the ability to maximize their output with minimum effort, making 'getting-up' a much safer and more efficient practice.

Some have argued that the lower risks involved in sticker art have attracted an older demographic – one with more respect, both for the law and for private property (see for example Walde 2007). Sticker artists may, for instance, have experimented with riskier forms of street art in their youth, and turned to stickers as a way of continuing their interaction with

the street while making themselves less vulnerable to legal action. My own research reflected this shifting demographic to a certain extent: *Haevi* is in his thirties with a young baby and a full time day job. Stickers provide a street-based artistic outlet for him, whilst also allowing him to maintain a job and family life¹⁸. Artists *Tower* and *Falk* from the *Fluctibus* campaign are also aged in their thirties; *Tower* chose to focus on stickers for his street work because he didn't want to "destroy" property which did not belong to him (pers. comm.). These kinds of attitudes certainly reflect the increasing legal pressure on street artists, and the increasingly imaginative exploration of street art media and materiality that has resulted.

They have also, however, contributed to the view that stickers are somehow inferior or subordinate to other, riskier forms of street art. "Although it's arguable that designing and making a sticker then finding just the right spot for it can be just as much work as a well done stencil or painted wall, they don't have the general first impression and don't appear to take as much work, even if they did" (*Okkle*: pers. comm.). Their

¹⁸ It should be noted here that *Haevi* also produces a large number of paste-ups as part of his street art, but that stickers make up a large proportion of his work.

perceived inferiority means that stickers are often assumed to be an *extension* of an artist's repertoire, rather than its basis.

Compared to the experience of making a stencil or spray-painting a mural, putting up a sticker can seem somehow *passive*. While street art is traditionally performative in nature, stickering is a fast and relatively detached process. The sticker is held at a distance from the body, and physical contact with the urban surface is often momentary, fleeting, and disguised as a normal movement. It can therefore be argued that stickers don't provide the same potential for physical re-engagement with the urban landscape as other forms of street art. At the same time, however, it can also be argued that the *accessibility* of sticker production makes re-engagement a real possibility for *all* members of society, and not just those accepted into the street art subculture.

The small scale of stickers means that they are quick to replicate or reproduce if they are made by hand, and cheap to print in large quantities. Latour notes that printed inscriptions are unique in the sense that they can be "reshuffled and recombined" at will, and superimposed to make new inscriptions; these options are even more widely applicable now that hand-

drawn designs can be scanned and edited on computers (1990: 19-20). Stickers are a *miniaturised, multiple* and *editable* version of more traditional forms of street art.

"Miniatures seem to have an intrinsic aesthetic quality", due in part to the fact that they are inherently "man made and, what is more, made by hand" (Levi-Strauss 1966: 23-24). They are therefore cultural products, and for this reason they have become "emblematic of craft and discipline; while the materiality of the product is diminished, the labour involved multiplies, and so does the significance of the total object" (Stewart 1993: 38).

Miniatures are exotic and gemlike; they can be kept close to the body, allowing the formation of a personal, physical relationship. During my time at Hatch, Oli told me he likes stickers because he can hold them in the palm of his hand, almost like a pet (pers. comm.); he can hold more than one at once and look at them next to each other, making comparisons. By collecting stickers Oli is creating a close-knit community of these token-sized images, all of which have their own attitude, personality or life history; he is also forging links with artists spread throughout the world, gathering this globally distributed phenomenon close into his own space at Hatch. By collecting stickers, Oli is creating his *own* miniaturised world.

Similarly, Fairey notes when he first started printing stickers “every sheet ... I printed felt like I was making the world a little smaller” – every sticker is put somewhere, marking that particular location as a living, actively inhabited place (2003). With thousands of stickers at ones’ disposal it becomes possible to imagine commandeering endless locations, claiming ownership of the spaces we inhabit. Some artists do this by putting up stickers where they go, tracking their own footsteps. For *Noel*, sticker bombing is an extension of tagging, a way of showing that the “city is living” (pers. comm.). French sticker artist *Nincompoop* leaves a sticker “as a fingerprint” (2005). Stickers can therefore act as a material trace of an artists’ movements and activities within the city, and thus can also represent a way for alienated or isolated people to remind themselves that there are in fact many active, spontaneous individuals constituting society. Street art and stickers mark the landscape with the ‘stigmata of personhood’, reminding us that there is both potential and a real possibility for meaningful, corporeal interactions with our physical environment and with other members of society (Mitchell 2005).

Where a street artist chooses to put a sticker is, to a large extent, dictated by the material qualities of the sticker: they adhere better to smooth, flat

surfaces like plastic or metal than they do to rough or grainy surfaces like wood or plaster. Ball notes “surfaces do not ... particularly want to be surfaces” (1997: 396). By this he means that the surfaces of materials are “less stable and more reactive” than their insides, so if another substance is placed next to this surface a reaction may take place at the interface, resulting in adhesion (ibid). Irregular surfaces are less likely to adhere to each other, because the two surfaces will only touch at certain points rather than all over, making the chemical reaction at the interface much weaker. Surfaces are therefore better suited to adhesion if they are smooth, or if one of the surfaces is “soft and deformable”, and therefore able to mould itself around irregularities – just like stickers (ibid: 406).

Some stickers adhere so effectively to smooth surfaces that they become impossible to remove without causing damage – *Tower* uses foils as part of his screen-printing technique which are so thin that “after one week you can’t peel it off, the sun and weather connects it” (pers. comm.). Figures 110 and 111 show the results of my own experiments with surfaces and interfaces in Berlin. This data supports *Tower’s* assertion that the weather does indeed have a significant impact on adhesion. Most noticeably the

extreme heat of Berlin's summer worsened adhesion in the vinyl stickers, which wrinkled and deformed.

This selective surface adhesion causes obvious patterning and clustering of stickers in urban environments, because over time stickers placed on inappropriate surfaces will peel away. This means that sticker patterning is not purely a result of the artists' intention, but also of external environmental and material factors. In the long term, these factors take over the reigns and dictate which stickers remain.

Stickers appear in numbers from just one or two to hundreds, clustered together on street signs, poles and posts of all varieties, electricity boxes, bus stops, and window frames (Fig. 113). Sometimes it seems like they are sticking *to one another* in the landscape - they find each other and cluster together in little nodes of activity amidst the chaotic urban environment. Artists all trying to fit their stickers on a specific surface (which is often limited in size) make aesthetic decisions about where their sticker would look best in relation to the others, or which composition will grab the attention of passers-by.



Figure 113: Sticker cluster (Author's own)

An extension of this is the purposeful creation of sticker 'combos' by collaborating groups of artists (for example *Haevi's Creature Ink*, Fig. 114), which may have become popular partly due to the fact that a group of stickers will undoubtedly catch the attention of the public more than a solitary one.



Figure 114: Creature Ink Combo (used with Haevi's kind permission)



Figures 115-116: Sticker composition (Author's own)

Figures 115-116 show a large sticker composition on Libauer Straße, Berlin. The sticker designs vary in age and content, so contributing artists have clearly all made independent decisions to place their work in such a way to enhance the natural aesthetic effect of the tiled wall. In doing so they have created a large, striking, collaborative artwork, which is likely to grab the attention of passers-by. I photographed this particular composition every day over a 7-day period, in the hopes that I might be able to observe the addition of new stickers and draw conclusions from the artist's choice

of placement. During this time, however, no changes were made at this site. It was as though the composition was complete, no artist felt the need to contribute anything further to it.

Artists often put stickers in the street with careful consideration of visibility or accessibility. Each artist I interviewed had a different view on this, encapsulating their own technique for getting the public's attention: *Haevi* places handmade stickers more carefully than machine printed ones, taking into consideration the amount of effort he has put in and the ease with which they might be removed; for him, visibility to passers-by is key, so he places stickers at eye-level (pers. comm.). *Noel* sometimes positions his stickers so that they surprise passers-by – “if you have five things in one street then maybe two can be hidden” (pers. comm.); while for *Tower* quantity is key – he sticks them anywhere and everywhere, because by using his own screen-printing techniques he can print thousands in just an hour (pers. comm.).

I also interviewed Lukas, a member of the *Undenk Crew*. This crew is spatially dispersed, but united by common social and political beliefs, and

the mutual desire to communicate these beliefs through street art¹⁹. Lukas places his stickers in relation to others which have already been put up: “you see a sticker somewhere and that triggers your urge to put up a sticker next to it, because it’s kind of like marking your territory ... two stickers will get more attention than one sticker, and so on, and that’s how entire traffic signs get covered” (pers. comm.).

So, the very act of putting up a sticker has developed so that it is dependant on factors like the nature of the receiving surface, the sticker raw material, and its vulnerability to removal. Materiality specifies a particular way of *experiencing* and *interacting* with stickers. Whenever we experience an image it is mediated (after Belting 2005). The medium controls perception and creates attention in context-specific ways (ibid). It

¹⁹ During our interview Lukas described Theodore Kaczynski as his personal political inspiration. Kaczynski’s manifesto discusses the evolution of society and technology, and proposes a radical overhaul of society itself (see <http://www.newshare.com/Newshare/Common/News/manifesto.html> for the full manifesto). Kaczynski is also known as the Unabomber, as later in life he went on to send a number of mail bombs killing 3 people – it is important to note at this point that Lukas draws his political background from Kaczynski’s manifesto, and not his violent activities. The *Undenk Crew* also draws political inspiration from George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the concept of convenient belief over truth (see <http://www.undenk.com/about/>).

is therefore impossible to separate image and medium, so it is important to take into consideration the effects of stickers *on the street*.

Street art is inherently corporeal, in a sense that extends beyond the artist/artwork relationship to also include the *beholder*. Public art turns inhabitants *of space* into participants *in space*. A piece of street art isn't performed by the artist alone, but must be *received* in order to exist and to be understood or somehow *validated* as an illegal act. After all, street art wouldn't exist in the same way if it wasn't deciphered and interpreted by its viewing audience. Perhaps we can even go so far as to say that the viewer *animates* the image (after Belting 2001).

“When an artwork exists in urban space, the commonplace prohibitions of gallery spectatorship usually don't apply – if you can reach it, you are perfectly free to run your hands over a paste-up, or, if you wanted to, there's even nothing to stop you having a good sniff of a stencil” (Young 2009). A fundamental material component of the street art experience is therefore *the street itself* - here the beholder is free of the 'aesthetic criticism' in which we are schooled from an early age (after Freedberg 1991: 17). The way we are habituated to react to artworks in art galleries

and museums is somewhat counterintuitive - "we suppress acknowledgement of the basic elements of cognition and appetite, or admit them only with difficulty" (ibid). Instead we are silent, introverted - trained to discuss artworks in terms of skill, composition, and colour. On the street we are free from these rules. The appearance of an un-commissioned, unapproved *expressive* act in what is often otherwise interpreted as a grey, lifeless urban landscape is both refreshing and inspiring. The street artists' ability to imaginatively use architecture, natural light and human interaction as key elements of their work is a pleasing move away from the white walls and strictly applied aesthetic of the art gallery.

Street art is fundamentally *interactive*: the art can be received in a multitude of ways, from a multitude of angles, rather than in a way prescribed by the artist or curator. In fact, it is almost impossible for the artist to control the viewer's experience in any way. The innate element of surprise that makes street art so unique and which encourages such a personal, spontaneous response plays a key role in promoting an “anti-intellectualistic climate” (Ginzburg 2002: 156). By emphasizing the basic, physical experience of an artwork just as much as its content, street artists

create a situation which is much more real, less intellectualised, and more relevant to the beholder.

Sticker art is unique because its networks and social relationships are negotiated to a large extent in cyber-space, perhaps more so than in the physical space of the artwork. What happens, then, when this physically interactive genre of art is experienced from a distance, in a virtual landscape? Sticker enthusiasts share photographs of their own work or that of other artists on blogs and photo-sharing websites, in a process which privileges the visual. We cannot smell or touch stickers when we experience them via the Internet. It is therefore plausible that there are sticker enthusiasts out there who are removed from the physical, material aspects of stickers and of sticker bombing, because they have only ever experienced them through secondary images taken by other people. In this sort of situation an individual's experience of stickers could be influenced by the skills of those actually going out and photographing them – for example, a wide-angle shot of a sticker in situ allows the viewer to appreciate it in the setting chosen for it by the artist – undoubtedly a crucial part of the artwork – whereas a close-up shot could lead to a disproportionate focus on the iconographic elements of sticker design.

When sticker culture is experienced via the virtual, online community the materiality of stickers is therefore changed significantly, displaced, if not removed altogether. This element could support the assertion that stickers are a more passive form of street art, albeit a more inclusive one at the same time. One can imagine a sort of 'watering down' or weakening of the passion and drive behind street art, when it becomes so widely spread throughout online networks which cannot possibly communicate the actual, physical experience of encountering a sticker in the street.

My fieldwork at Hatch involved lengthy conversations with Oli about why he collects stickers. The material properties of stickers play a crucial role here also: his collection started when he got hold of a sticker that he felt was too special to put up. The implication is that by putting this sticker up Oli wouldn't *have* it any more. Stickers are so small you can hold them in your hand "like a small animal" (Oli, pers. comm.). The small size of stickers therefore makes them pleasurable to hold, to have, to *keep*, as well as to put up.

So to summarise, sticker culture wouldn't exist in the same way if stickers weren't small, portable, and adhesive. These characteristics make stickers

an entirely unique, tradable, shareable street art medium, which has revolutionised the ways street art is experienced and understood. From the basic motion of peeling off the stickers' backing and pressing it against a surface, to the more complex interactions which take place when stickers are encountered in public and private or virtual spheres, it is clear that materiality plays a fundamental role in qualifying stickers as a form of street art. Similarly, the material properties of stickers make them highly collectible: they can be held, compared, presented and stored very easily. Notably however, stickers which are collected are rarely stuck to anything – this property becomes disabled, or rather disused, the stickers' adhesive potential never realised.

Chapter 6 – Style, Recognition, Social Memory

“Originality’ is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence” (Krauss 1984: 18)

Like brands, sticker artists are keen to insert themselves as nodal points in the rapidly expanding web of relations that comprise sticker culture; to do this, they must produce a design which creates a solid, memorable visual identity for themselves or their street persona. The pressures of the space available on a sticker mean it is unusual for sticker artists to sign their work, as other street artists may do with stencils or murals. This means the artist has to engineer a way of making it clear that they have made a sticker, without necessarily putting their name on it.

Companies use logos to gain the attention of the consumer, with the aim of “cutting through clutter” (Henderson and Cote 1998: 15). The rationale behind logos is that images are perceived and logged in the social memory faster than words. A person is more likely to instantly recognise and remember your name or idea if it's presented in pictorial form. Images are

said to be capable of conveying “textual’ arguments without requiring ... special training in the conventions of discourse”, because they achieve a

“direct psychological effect through [their] mimicry of appearances” (Pardo 1999: 48-49). Language works with arbitrary, cultural signs. “Images, on the other hand, strike upon the mind in a different manner to words” (Bartlett 1954: 216); they can be understood as “natural, universal” signs, in the sense that their resemblance to (or mimicry of) reality opens them up for interpretation by the viewer (Mitchell 1980: 3). Most sticker artists therefore focus on image-based designs, due to the necessity for quick and efficient communication to the viewer.

Some sticker artists focus on their tag in sticker designs, reproducing it and manipulating it in a multitude of ways to produce different visual effects. *Tower’s* tag is undoubtedly textual – it is, after all, made up of five letters from the Latin alphabet (see figures 40-61). When it is reproduced so consistently, however, it seems to become almost pictorial. *Tower*

stretches the possibilities of text, exploring every aspect of those five letters that constitute his name and manipulating them until they have become something altogether different. At what point do letters stop being text? We only need to look to some of the more traditional graffiti style tags to see that the letters can be so heavily stylised that they become unrecognisable. Perhaps the extensive techniques of manipulation and editing available to sticker artists allow them to produce tag-based designs that are so graphically developed they actually appeal to our capacity for remembering images rather than text. The tags are short, stylised, and conceivable as a whole, making them an easily digestible image-like chunk. Tags may therefore be just as memorable as images when they are presented in a tight-size graphic format.

In the world of advertising, “repeated elements improve recognition” (Henderson and Cote 1998: 24). Repetition of images reinforces them psychologically, easing the processes of recall and remembrance - the more often you see an image the easier it becomes to recognise, both in a shorter time and from a greater distance. While experimenting with colour, size and typeface, *Tower's* stickers all resemble each other in the sense that they bear his name and nothing else. They are also exceptionally

common in Berlin, appearing on almost every street, sometimes with multiple stickers in a single space, creating a high level of image repetition. This suggests that *Tower*, as a slogan, may be more familiar, more recognisable, and easier to remember than for example the *Undenk Crew*, whose stickers are less prolific and much more varied in design.

When *Noel* first started making stickers he designed a green worm image. He had a large number machine-printed, and put them up all over Berlin, in a specific way – with the worm positioned as if he was emerging from a surface like a doorstep or pavement. The repetition of this very simple green design throughout the city led to the eventual formation of his particular street identity. *Noel* has gone on to create his own brand through the consistent use of a particular colour scheme – predominantly green, black and white. By repeating this colour scheme throughout all his sticker designs, *Noel* is able to produce a wide variety of designs which don't include his worm character, but which remain recognisable as his work. His stickers are also characterised by a prevailing hand-drawn style, with bold lines and a cartoon look.

So *Noel* and *Tower* both use techniques of repetition to communicate their visual persona on the streets of Berlin. *Haevi's* stickers aren't as easy to characterise in this way: as an artist *Haevi* has a very distinctive drawing style. He draws brightly coloured characters, ranging from people to bears to birds; his sticker designs are often quite busy, with many elements. His colour schemes vary from sticker to sticker, as do his drawing and printing materials. He does usually sign or tag his stickers, but not in a stylistically consistent way. *Haevi's* work therefore seems to comply to a lesser extent with traditional rules of branding and logo design, as it isn't visually consistent across his entire body of work. Once familiar with *Haevi's* work it is easy to spot his style from a distance. To an uninterested passer-by, however, his variable style may be less easy to recall.

The stickers from the *Undenk Crew* also lack stylistic consistency, and are therefore difficult to recognise or recall. It is easy to imagine that, had I presented here a variety of stickers displaying just their logo, the Winston rabbit (see Fig. 79), I would draw a different conclusion. Notably, the *Undenk Crew's* aims in street art are entirely political, in contrast to the other three artists presented here. In this case, the desire to communicate a variety of political messages has created a stylistically and thematically

varied selection of stickers: the *Undenk Crew* may not specifically use their stickers to create a powerful visual identity for themselves as artists, but rather to grab the attention of passers-by and communicate a message to them. Ironically however, by focusing less on creating a corporate-style branded identity, they weaken the communicative strength of their stickers. The 'Bollocks' sticker pictured in Figure 7 is also politically motivated, as it was made for the specific purpose of ad-busting. In contrast to the selection of *Undenk Crew* stickers there is only one 'Bollocks' sticker design. It therefore communicates its message much more consistently. Combined with the fact that it is a very simple, bold, and relatively large design, these factors make this sticker an excellent communicator: "there's definitely a sense that people are aware of them, and find them funny ... it certainly caused a lot of conversations, and a lot of laughs" (Tom and Andy, 'Bollocks' creators, pers. comm.).

Looking around at the Hatch collection and at stickers on the streets of Berlin, it was clear that sticker designs often created a 'hand-made' look even if, on closer inspection, they had actually been produced on a computer. In contrast, branded stickers usually demonstrated more stylised, computerised graphics creating an overall more synthetic or over-

worked design (see for example Vans stickers, page 26). “Seeing a hand drawn sticker is an experience” – it provides a corporeal basis for understanding, as the viewer can see the artist’s actions unfold within the artwork itself (Cooper 2008). Perhaps we can say that hand-made stickers function as *technologies of enchantment* – “it is the way an art object is construed as having come into the world which is the source of power such objects have over us – their becoming rather than their being” (Gell 1992: 47). We can see corporate brands trying to capitalise on this apparent preference for hand-made stickers through their numerous collaborations with urban and street artists to create distinctive and eye-catching designs. Each sticker artist wants to make a visual identity, and to do something new, innovative and creative. At the same time however, they want their work to be identified as part of the street art genre, and they have drawn significant amounts of inspiration from artists doing similar things in the streets before them. Gell notes that artworks “come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people ... they marry, so to speak, and beget offspring, which bear the stamp of their antecedents” (1998: 153). Two of Fairey’s earliest sticker designs - Andre the Giant and the stylised Obey Giant (Figs. 118-119) – might be classed as the grandparents of one such lineage of sticker designs we see today. Figures 120-123 show some

of the stickers that have been created using Fairey’s designs as a basis for replication, sampling or inspiration.



Figures 118-119: Andre the Giant sticker and Obey sticker (Author’s own)



Figures 120-123: Interpretations of Fairey’s Obey sticker (Author’s own)

Familial iconographic relationships also develop when artists sample brand logos. Henderson and Cote argue that familiarity is a key factor in the success of a logo, and designs that are similar to well known symbols are particularly known for 'affecting' the viewer (1998: 15). So by sampling famous sticker designs artists don't just cement their place in a stylistic lineage, they exploit the feeling of familiarity and ultimate trust a viewer may feel towards that particular image. In one of their stickers, the *Undenk Crew* samples the logo of brand *North Face* (Fig. 124). If a passer-by sees this sticker briefly they may actually assume it is a *North Face* advertisement; only on closer inspection might they realise it is something altogether different. The initial act of recognition makes a connection with the viewer, at which point the sticker has done its job.



Figure 124: *The Undenk Crew sticker (Author's own) and North Face logo (from www.thenorthface.com)*

In the same way, while *Tower* was no doubt playing on the fact that he is a street artist and part of a subculture when he sampled the *Subway* logo (Fig. 125), he was at the same time manufacturing an effective way of lodging himself into the public psyche in exactly the same way as the corporations themselves. By using the very same logos used by famous brand names, sticker artists are using capitalist tools to fight capitalism, thereby turning the familiar corporate logo on itself.



Figure 125: *Tower sticker (Author's own) and Subway logo (from www.subway.co.uk)*

The myriad ways pictures reference and cross-reference each other both within and between cultural contexts begs the question: "how do new images appear in the world?" (Mitchell 2005: 86). Indeed, is there even such a thing as a *new* image? Intertextuality²⁰ refers to the idea that all

²⁰ Intertextuality emerged as a literary term, but has since been used by both structuralist and post-structuralist theorists including Derrida, Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva in sociological and anthropological contexts.

signs and symbols originate from a single system - Vygotsky's 'web of meaning', or the poststructuralist Text (Porter 1986). Under this theory, the unique text written by the individual author – and indeed, the unique masterpiece created by the genius artist – becomes a mere product of the frame or network of signs from which it emerges. "Every discourse is composed of 'traces', pieces of other texts that help constitute its meaning" (ibid: 34). In other words, every text or artwork is necessarily cumulative, a result of culturally specific social influences reminiscent of Strathern's individual person who is "the sum of their relations" (Strathern 1988 in Gell 1998: 222).

"Authorial intention" fades and gives way to the prevailing discourse tradition – the creative individual becomes "a member of a team, and a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning" (Porter 1986: 34). Each text or artwork is intrinsically linked to every other, as they have all emerged from the same discourse system.

Intertextuality is therefore a key theory to consider in relation to the evolution and development of a large, cohesive body of work such as sticker art. It provides an explanation for the stylistic unity that has

emerged, whereby stickers from all cultures can be identified as belonging to the urban art genre. The Internet, which enables fast communication of creative ideas on a global scale, has undoubtedly aided the emergence of this style, meaning individuals from spatially and culturally distant areas can create their own discrete discourse system.

Traditionally, artists have been understood to produce work which affects the beholder, in a "simple linear, one-way movement" (Porter 1986: 40). Porter notes, however, that in "poststructuralist rhetoric" the audiences' response can in fact influence the artist, thereby affecting the direction their work takes (ibid). Intertextuality therefore also allows for a reflexive, discursive relationship between the artist and the audience. By putting stickers out into the landscape sticker artists are themselves affected – by their own physical experience, by the audience response, and by the new potential they have created for discourse and interaction. The effects of the artists' own actions *on themselves* will ultimately affect their next piece, thereby creating a cyclical pattern of action, response and effect.

At the same time, however, intertextuality provides a rather deterministic explanation of stylistic cohesion. If all artists are working within a system

which necessarily dictates their actions, how can they produce anything original or unique? The individual is lost to the system within which they function. Gell's notion of 'least difference' shares many of the same ideas as intertextuality, but provides a less deterministic explanation for the phenomenon of artistic 'style'.

'Style' is "what enables any artwork to be referred to the whole(s) or 'larger unities' to which it belongs" (Gell 1998: 162-163). He proposes that designs and motifs develop through "making the least modification ... possible in order to establish something as different", while still maintaining a link with its forerunners (Gosden 2005: 195). In other words, the "prevailing social context of material forms" is always taken into account when designing something new, so that while we end up with an "infinity of forms", we can in fact find marked resemblances between them (Gosden 2005: 195).

With the notion of 'least difference', it is possible to see how a large, distributed, yet coherent body of work could evolve over time. Style is "relations between relations of forms" - it develops as a result of a complex and timely process of link making and cross-referencing (Gell 1998: 215).

While Gell's theory proposes similarity between objects of the same 'style', it comes with the implication that if the artist wanted to produce something radically different they would be able to. The artist is not stripped of all creative potential, but rather situated within a framework where it may actually be beneficial to model one's work within a pre-existing stylistic tradition.

According to Gell, the artist's oeuvre exists as a distributed object. In the same way that a china dinner set is fundamentally bound together by origin and function, an artist's body of work is in many ways inseparable, even when it is distributed around the world. The oeuvre "constitutes ... an independent chunk of space-time, which can be accessed via each work individually, each standing indexically for all of them and the historical-biographical context of their production" (1998: 232). Stickers therefore always reference their maker. They can also potentially reference the entire sticker street art genre, if we consider the whole thing as a giant distributed object.

So how do these stylistic attributes relate to what stickers *do*? Stickers form a distinct set of objects placed overtly throughout the urban

landscape; stickers that are repetitious may become particularly ingrained in our psyche, acting as both physical and psychological markers of place and time. Stickers show that the city is living, breathing, and actively seeking engagement. People walk the streets, distributing stickers as they go as part of a global campaign aiming to 'cut through the visual clutter', and have an impact on the public. Whether they manage to achieve this, or alternatively simply *add* to the visual clutter, depends on the stylistic attributes of their sticker designs. To successfully lodge themselves in the collective social memory, artists need to create a clear and consistent public image for themselves. *Noel* and *Tower* are particularly successful in doing this, using techniques of repetition and simplistic design. Ironically, these techniques are those that have been heavily researched and perfected by corporate brands, suggesting that the street art genre must borrow tools from the capitalist world if it is to truly subvert it.

While perceiving, recognising, and recalling are all related psychological functions, remembering involves a process of placing material in relation to other material, "an active organisation of past reactions" (ibid: 200). This process of ordering material provides both a sense of continuity and the potential to locate and identify temporal markers of change (Radley 1990).

It is therefore possible to think about how artefacts like stickers are implicated in the ways people create their collective and individual pasts, in this process of identity formation.

Chapter 7 – Distribution, Ownership, Commercialisation

Street art stickers are distributed in a number of ways. Primarily, artists make their own stickers and put them up by hand, in person. During our interviews both *Noel* and *Tower* told me they have occasionally given stickers to friends who are going abroad, or to acquaintances that ask for them; but for both artists, this is not really the intention. “The placement is an intrinsic part of completing the art, and that’s part of the process of creation, and so you don’t want to hand that over to other people” (Lukas pers. comm.).

Aside from sticker artists who embrace the physical, phenomenological experience of putting stickers up, there exists a huge global network of sticker artists of all ages who use the Internet as a tool for distribution, trading and networking. Stickers are an interesting subset of street art precisely because they form a street-based image system whose spread is organised and conducted to a large extent via a complementary *online landscape*. This is enabled by their material properties of scale and portability – stickers can be put in an envelope and posted anywhere in the

world for very little money. Or, better still, their graphic designs can be saved in PDF or JPEG files and shared online for free.

A widely used tool for sticker networking is the website Flickr.com, which allows members to upload large numbers of photos. Sticker artists often use it to record their own work²¹, and to find other sticker artists whose work they admire. Artists may contact each other to do collaborations – for example *Haevi’s* collaboration with artists including *Super Fat Cat* to create *Creature Ink*²². Artists might also trade stickers if, for example, they find another artist in an exotic or famous geographical location, or to expand their personal collection. *Haevi* trades stickers with “people who contact me over the Internet (mainly via Flickr), in which case I choose to trade with the people whose style I also like and whose stickers I’d like to have” (pers. comm.). Despite the fact that anyone can design or put up a sticker, *Haevi’s* comment suggests more is required to really become a *part of the*

²¹ See for example *Haevi’s* Flickr page - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/haevi/> - Accessed 01/09/10

sticker community. It *is* a democratic medium, but sticker art is also a *subculture* – in order to be fully included an artist must earn the respect of their peers with the quality or ingenuity of their work.

Sites like Flickr offer an opportunity for artists to pool ideas and seek inspiration from other people on similar artistic adventures all around the world. Artists who spread their stickers more widely may be comforted or excited by the fact that *their* product can be found in numerous locations around the world, even if they have never been there personally. Munich-based artist Falk designed and created the *Fluctibus* campaign, which is famous for its three dimensional bacteria or germ stickers (Fig. 126).



Figure 126: *Fluctibus* stickers (Author's own)

Fluctibus stickers can be found as far and wide as Australia, Ireland, and the Great Wall of China. “The message is supposed to be kind of a social issue” – bacteria are everywhere, and these particular germs have the

ability to spread and colonise the world as prolifically as other forms of visual media like advertising (pers. comm.). Falk collects photos of his stickers in situ in the world (either taken by himself or by fans who email them to him), and records them on his online blog²³.

Sticker distribution also takes place via companies like Hatch and Sticker Drop²⁴. Sticker Drop is an organisation based in Washington DC, whose “primary purpose is to distribute stickers from street artists and clothing brands” (Dustin McDonald pers. comm.). Customers can buy a ‘basic’, ‘standard’ or ‘gold’ sticker pack via the website; they receive a set number of stickers, composed of designs donated by participating artists and brands. In return for their donation artists and brands get featured on Sticker Drop’s blog and gallery, their stickers get distributed all around the world, plus “fans stick them on their sketchbooks, boards, laptops etc, where their friends and classmates will see them” (ibid). Websites like Sticker Drop form a widely accepted means of distribution within the scene – all parties are satisfied, and the costs to the consumer are kept as low as possible to cover just administration and postage.

²³ See <http://www.fluctibus.com/central/> - Accessed 03/09/10

²⁴ <http://stickerdrop.com/> - Accessed 01/09/10

The exchanging of street art as a commodity item changes its meaning. Some would even argue that buying and selling of street art is impossible – that this very act turns street art into something altogether different, because it is removed from the street context. “When appropriated and commodified ... graffiti changes to art ... crime becomes creativity, madness becomes insight, dirt becomes something to hang over the fireplace” (Cresswell 1996). Shepard Fairey’s Obey Giant campaign is world famous for the limited edition sticker packs it produces²⁵. The Obey campaign’s commercial growth has led to accusations from within the scene that Fairey is a ‘sell-out’ – that he has succumbed to the temptations of commercial and monetary success, and that in doing so he has somehow sacrificed the moral or ethical roots of his work. He started out with an anti-establishment, anti-capitalist set of ‘visual propaganda’, but has ended up with a commercially successful brand.

Negative response from within the street art scene has been so marked that today Fairey’s website is full of essays and articles vehemently defending his right to be a successful businessman as well as a street

²⁵ See <http://obeygiant.com/store/home.php?cat=4> for the Obey online store, which sells sticker packs, skateboards, vinyl toys, limited edition prints, notepads, and his own line of clothing. Accessed 31/08/10

artist. “The campaign exists in harmony with, not contrary to, conspicuous consumption” (Fairey [1]). According to Fairey, the campaign “pokes fun at the process by teasing the consumer with propaganda for a product which is merely more propaganda for the campaign... the propaganda and the product are the same” (ibid). Fairey sees his commercial products as a way of spreading his ‘propaganda’, subverting the system, and highlighting the consumer as a sort of unquestioning consumptive machine.

The fact that Fairey openly shares this view via his website and in numerous interviews and documentaries necessarily defines the consumption of the *Obey* brand as a kind of *ironic consumption*. The nature of the subculture and the fact that Fairey has a dedicated global following suggests that many of his online customers probably do read the material on his website prior to making their purchase. He refers to the “unaware consumer”, who has been “subversively indoctrinated” by the *Obey* campaigns’ “commercial embrace” (ibid). “I’m trying to achieve as large scale a coup as possible with an absurd icon that should never have made it this far” (ibid). *Obey* consumers are therefore potentially aware of their role as pawns in the capitalist system, and still they opt to purchase *Obey* products. These are informed consumers embracing the opportunity

to act within a subculture, undermining the capitalist machine by knowingly buying into something deemed worthless and subversive.

Artist Barbara Kruger manufactured a similar situation with her advertising collaboration with Mother in Selfridges, London, which covered the store in huge slogans including 'We are slaves to the commodities around us' and 'Buy me, I'll change your life' (Fig. 127).



Figure 127: Barbara Kruger's Selfridges campaign (image from www.urbanspacesandplaces.blogspot.com)

Mother labels itself as an "anti-advertising" agency, whose campaigns "tend to reverse the standard clichés of advertising in an attempt to reach jaded audiences" (Douglas 2006). "The assumption is that the Selfridges customer is so post-modern and media-savvy that they're all in on the joke. But what is the joke exactly? That shopping is an alienating process. To say, 'I shop, therefore I am' is to point out the emptiness at the core of the capitalist lifestyle" (Hooper 2007). In the case of both Selfridges and the *Obey* campaign, the overt irony is unchallenged. It remains unclear whether the consumer is in on the joke, or is the butt joke itself.

Fairey also points out the fact that political or social messages couldn't be communicated so quickly and over such a large area if it weren't for the culture of conspicuous consumption we find ourselves within today – "the Giant project could not exist within a social climate that was not susceptible to consumption catalysed by image repetition" (Fairey [1]). Again this is ironic – sticker-based street art systems exist to highlight and undermine the overwhelming amount of visual media which swarms over the urban landscape; at the same time, such systems would be unable to spread and therefore have any impact if it weren't for today's society of the spectacle. Other sticker campaigns which exemplify this include the *You*

Are Beautiful campaign, which distributes stickers bearing this simple statement (Fig. 128) with the aim of incorporating the message into “the over absorption of mass media and lifestyles that are wrapped in consumer culture” (*You Are Beautiful* statement²⁶). The idea is that when unsuspecting members of the public encounter a campaign sticker, they will experience a moment of “positive self realisation”, as opposed to feelings of low self-esteem or social pressure which may result from encountering other kinds of advertising images (ibid). It is hoped that this positive experience may prompt the beholder to take action, to “create activism instead of consumerism” (ibid).



Figure 128: *You Are Beautiful* stickers (from www.you-are-beautiful.com)

²⁶ See <http://www.you-are-beautiful.com/INSTALLATIONS/ESSAY1.htm> for the full *You Are Beautiful* statement

Similar sticker campaigns include *Visual Narcotics*²⁷, which aims to wake people up to the fact that images can be understood as a contemporary global addiction (Fig. 129), and the campaign of *Implied Regurgitation*²⁸ - also known as the ‘I Threw Up’ project (Fig. 130). The success of these campaigns actively *depends* on the globally distributed mass consumption of images.



Figures 129-130: *The Visual Narcotics* campaign (from www.20mg.com) and an *Implied Regurgitation* sticker in situ (from www.ithrewup.com)

²⁷ <http://www.20mg.com/vn.html> - Accessed 01/09/10

²⁸ <http://www.ithrewup.com> - Accessed 01/09/10

But while street artists so often depict a monumental moral divide between their own activities and those of corporations, a key issue which came to mind during my fieldwork in Berlin was the fact that a lot of artists seem to use stickers in *much the same way* as the advertisers, even – as I have already discussed - down to the simplification of artworks and tags into logo-type snippets. Despite the fact that graffiti and street art culture famously originated as part of a movement *against* corporate advertising, there are suggestions that it may have initially drawn *inspiration* from the corporate world. Artist EDEC states that as a kid in the 1980's he and his friends would collect tags and labels from new clothes, cut out logos, and either hang them in their room or stick them into scrapbooks as a kind of record or display: "It was like they made an altar in their room with tags. *The graffiti name tags were an extension of brand labels*" (in Cooper 2010: 18, emphasis added). A similar phenomenon could be seen in the newly unified former East Berlin: one artist "wrote brand names, instead of tag names, before he developed his own tag (the notebook was filled with 'Diesel', 'Reebok', 'Nike' and so on)" (Young 2010).

For *Tower*, stickers are "only for publicity" ... "just for fame" (pers. comm.). Stickers serve him as a medium to show his name, and to show it very quickly, with little risk or effort. "In my opinion, stickers are the most effective promotional tool for the price" (Fairey 2003). Street artists therefore exploit the *materiality* of the stickers – their small size and portability, the fact that they can be reproduced in large quantities, the fact that they can be put up inconspicuously and in daylight – to create a sphere of low cost and highly effective publicity. In short, stickers, and their material qualities of multiplicity and spread-ability, are a publicist's dream – one that is exploited by artists and advertisers alike.

Brands and companies targeting younger audiences often use stickers as a kind of gimmick or a form of publicity. They may give stickers away free with their products, or they may make their own sticker packs for sale. Brands that target urban subcultures like skateboarding or BMX may also create sticker designs by collaborating with urban artists. Particularly ruthless marketing types might attempt to win over a target audience from *within* it – "companies hire out teenagers to slap up stickers and posters, and pay their fines when they are caught by the police" (*You Are Beautiful* 2004). So what may appear to be street art to the untrained eye may in

fact be a cunning advertising ploy; advertising being, of course, the arch-nemesis of graffiti and street art culture.

Artists and companies alike realise that visual media like stickers can be used to gain the trust and subsequent support or custom of the general public. Just how this is done becomes fundamental to whether or not the public becomes *integrated* or *exploited*. *Integrity* therefore comes across as a key factor in deciding whether or not an artist or artwork is labelled a sell-out.

The *Undenk Crew* have an online shop²⁹ which sells bags and prints; they also visit and market their work at trade shows, and in the past they have produced custom skateboards and t-shirts. Given the strong political views of the crew, I asked Lukas whether or not these commercial enterprises presented a worrying paradox for its members – by creating commercial products, are they selling out? “The commercialisation aspect is really difficult ... I’ve struggled with that a lot, thinking about it ... I think what’s important is communication or... like exposure in itself is not a bad thing, it’s just the question of where you use it and why you use it” (pers. comm.). In this sense, Lukas sees the *Undenk Crew’s* rabbit logo (also known as

²⁹ <http://www.undenk.com/category/shop/> - Accessed 31/08/10

Winston, see Fig. 79) as a positive element if it aids recognition and memory of the *Undenk* philosophy.

Fairey states “if something maintains its integrity and quality, people shouldn’t mind if it becomes popular” (Fairey [2]). His comment raises the interesting issue of the popularisation of street art culture: if street art is frequently exposed in the mass media, its “subcultural signs exhaust their potential to provoke” (Kosut 2006: 1038). So if street art gains a global, demographically varied fan base, it no longer stands out as something rebellious, different, or anti-establishment. Popularisation is often shortly followed by commercialisation – and this sublimely capitalist combination can render subcultures just another meaningless sphere for consumption. No longer can they provide a safe-haven for creative individuals wishing to combat their own feelings of urban disengagement, because the material elements have been selected, packaged and sold as the next big thing to modern urbanites. It can be argued that an easily distributed medium like stickers has actually perpetuated this trend towards popularisation, by facilitating the growth of a global fan base.

Stickers therefore highlight some interesting crossovers between street art and the corporate world. Stickers are used by corporate brands as a tool

for advertising. Corporate stickers are distributed over the Internet, in shops and cafes, and they may even be put up in the street. At the same time, street artists may use stickers as publicity. They are also distributed via the Internet, and they are primarily put up in the street. Avid collectors around the world collect both forms of stickers. Despite these interesting and perhaps somewhat unexpected relationships, however, street art stickers remain somehow distinct from the corporate world. The fundamental difference seems to be one of *ownership* and *intention*.

The intention behind street art stickers is multi-faceted. In part, they function to create and publicise the sticker artist. It is, however, very unusual that the artist will make any money or capitalist gain from this kind of publicity – it functions instead to bolster their public identity and cement their place within the street art subculture. Stickers also function to create public discourse and make links with other individuals doing the same thing – they are a *social tool*. Companies, in contrast, use stickers to publicise themselves, their products, or their events with a specific aim in mind. This is usually associated with commercial profit or success, making these kinds of stickers a *business tool*. The intention and ownership

behind branded and art stickers therefore sets them apart as fundamentally different kinds of objects.

Chapter 8 – Conclusions

“We don’t like advertising. It’s a completely redundant industry, only existing to fuel consumption of unnecessary crap, playing on people’s sense of inadequacy, and dominating public space with corporate messaging ... we wanted to let other public space users participate in these damaging one-sided conversations that are inflicted on us everyday” (Tom and Andy, pers. comm.).

The all-encompassing spread of visual media in today’s modern “scopic regime” has led to the development of a phenomenon we can term the ‘disengaged person’ (Ginzburg 2002: 149). As more and more ‘public’ spaces are privatised by advertising campaigns, today’s urbanites can feel a sense of emptiness or meaninglessness. One technique for combating these negative effects is to attempt to re-establish links, both with other people and with the material world, which can seem distant and disposable.

The Internet is a modern tool which has proved invaluable in this process, by allowing people to form social relationships with individuals all around the world. Sticker culture represents one such globally distributed network

of social relations. Stickers are shared and traded via websites like Flickr.com in a global system of *gift exchange*. Exchanged stickers both represent and encapsulate the agency and the distributed personhood of the artist. The stickers are *dividual artworks*, the artists themselves *dividual persons* (after Strathern 1990). Being entirely socially constructed, the “sum of their relations”, the stickers and artists therefore represent the antithesis of the capitalist system of commodity exchange and conspicuous consumption, as, of course, does the entire street art genre. Individuals like Oli also *collect* specific stickers in a characteristic attempt to re-engage with material culture; they assign meaning, value and sociality to material objects, and in doing so they create their own miniaturised world.

At the same time, stickers allow street artists to make overt anti-capitalist statements without the risks of legal action carried by other forms of street art. This allows them to be more prolific in the environment, to cover a wider area, and to make street art appearances in the most heavily

populated of areas. Stickers can therefore represent a modern day utopia of sharing, reaching out and re-engaging with the world around us.

At the same time, however, stickers are a medium widely used in corporate advertising campaigns. To be truly effective at getting the attention of the viewing public, sticker artists must take advantage of branding techniques developed by the corporations themselves, including the development of logos. In order to cut through urban visual clutter, they must first present themselves as *part of it*. The use of stickers as a form of street art therefore represents anti-capitalist sentiment being expressed in a fundamentally *capitalist way* – within the oeuvre of capitalist advertising itself. Ironically, by using stickers street artists advertise as much as the corporations.

Sticker artists frequently experiment with more commercial forms of expression. This has been evident in this investigation in the form of Shepard Fairey's hugely successful *Obey* campaign, the *Undenk Crew's* online store, and the sticker packs produced by numerous artists including *Tower*. It seems that for the artists, these kinds of commercial enterprise are acceptable within street art culture as long as they maintain their

personal message or integrity. The bounds of what is possible as a street artist are stretched to include profitable ventures. Street art stickers are anti-capitalist, but the whole activity costs money. In order to progress and develop as a sticker artist, ethical boundaries are therefore blurred: in these cases stickers inhabit a liminal space somewhere in-between capitalism and anti-capitalism. Fans of the genre commonly interpret these activities negatively: the Hatch project was criticised for seeking corporate sponsorship, and Shepard Fairey is said to have betrayed his roots. Artworks and individuals are labelled as 'sell-outs' by incensed street art fans, who want to maintain their subculture as exclusive and not-for-profit.

We can therefore identify a productive *tension* between stickers as tokens of an exclusive, anti-capitalist subculture, and stickers as a widely consumed advertising tool. This tension allows stickers to exist and to proliferate in urban environments, spreading the word of street artists overtly and prolifically, and yet avoiding the eyes of the law. The innate danger is of course that the viewing public will fail to recognise *these* stickers as something different, in which case they may end up *adding* to the alienating effects of visual media.

Schacter (2005) discusses the idea of graffiti 'linguistics' – the fact that graffiti culture encapsulates its own forms of calligraphy, clothing, and even language, all of which have evolved to suit the specific ritualised 'graffiti performance'. The very materiality of stickers negates a lot of these properties – the act of putting one up is quick and usually as subtle as possible to allow colonisation of the busiest urban areas; people of all walks of life can make stickers, and the fact that most of the social relations are performed online means that nobody necessarily has to find out if, as a sticker artist, you don't wear the right clothes or use the right kind of slang to be accepted into the culture. As a subculture sticker art is therefore different: the use of the Internet as the main form of communication means that principles of inclusion or exclusion are relocated to the quality or concept behind artworks themselves. The *person* is therefore less visible in sticker culture, its corporeal aspects significantly downplayed. Urban disengagement *is* being counteracted, but using a characteristically urban technology.

Sticker enthusiasts may never meet in person, their social relations being formed and maintained in a virtual world *disconnected* from reality. Sticker culture has become *displaced*, from the physical landscape to a virtual

one, where collaborations are sent via email, and pseudonyms now contain underscores and '@' signs. And while sticker culture is flourishing in its new cyber home, many argue that the street art scene in Berlin is stagnating (*Noel* and Lukas, pers. comm.).

The main reason for the huge amount of street art in Berlin is purely because the city can't afford to clean it up. This has led to the formation of a very open and active street art community, and to a foreigner such as myself Berlin seems like a kind of street art utopia. But it is this very openness that is apparently leading to Berlin's downfall as a street art capital. As more and more people become involved in the scene and put stickers on the street it becomes harder to shock or surprise the viewer. These effects are compounded by the widespread sharing and decreased corporeality of stickers, a medium which is interpreted as representing a loss of aggression in street art. Sticker culture is played out to a large extent in the comfort of one's own home, away from the eyes of the law, and at one's leisure. It lacks the adrenaline and risk-taking associated with more hands-on forms of street art. It is also, as this study has shown, being used in many cases as a means of personal branding, rather than a means to communicate specific political or ideological messages,

becoming something that rather resembles the very thing street art is supposed to fight against: corporate advertisements and the mass media.

To conclude then, stickers represent a complex, multi-faceted subset of the street art genre. Sticker art straddles boundaries, occupying the grey area between two extremes of capitalism and anti-capitalism. Further research into the removal of stickers from the street could be incredibly revealing: to what extent does the use of stickers as a *corporate* medium enable them to proliferate as a *street art* medium? Do they really evade the eyes of the law?

Finally, this investigation into the dynamics of sticker culture continues with you, the reader. It is up to you to decide what happens to the stickers included in this project. Perhaps you are keen to find an appropriate spot to experiment with sticker bombing; if this is the case, how will you decide where to put them? Or, like Oli, you may feel you want to possess them instead of putting them up. Or perhaps you're tempted to take a look on the Internet - you could even trade these (incredibly rare) stickers for some you like better. Whatever you decide to do, these stickers give you the opportunity to start making your world a little bit smaller.

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