

## Street adhesive

### Street stickers as devices of disruptive narratives, a study on urban decals and their relationship with the public spaces they inhabit

By Alejandro A. Leal

Finding a fresh specimen in the wild is a tantalizing victory. At any given point of time, there can be hundreds scattered along a city block, adorning “NO PARKING” signs, affixed to broken traffic light controller boxes, attached to street names, or glued to parking meter payment stations. They all have different messages; many carry a purposely-indecipherable slogan or emblem: a logo; a drawing; a name; an illustration of the Count Orlok character from *Nosferatu*. And all share one common medium: a piece of paper with an adhesive surface on its back, used by many urban street art bombers and artists to plant them as part of visually subversive campaigns on public property.

“At its best, street art repositions the public space around it, making it a place where cryptic little messages are offered to those who care to see them. Even an image that might not resonate much on its own--a flower, a cartoon bunny--sends out a different frequency when it shows up on a banged-up city block.”<sup>1</sup>

So when a city dweller, walking about the city block sees a decal fixed in the back of a “walking zone” post, an instant connection is born. One that is absent from any of the traditional channels of visual communication technology; there are no screens, there are no lights, there are no prompts. Only an instantaneous analog visual interruption that lasts the second it takes the reader to identify the familiar emblem. And move along.

“Unlike interpersonal relations where most people have a great deal of personal and emotional investment, relations with urban infrastructures and locations often barely rise to the level of consciousness for most people.”<sup>2</sup>

Urban stickers have been appearing on city streets in the past several years as a form of evolutionary street art. They borrow from the subversive aesthetics of graffiti, being an intrusive medium, and yet, they rise above the illicit realm to an murky level where pop art, commercial design, and vandalism meet. “Street artists see their imagery as a counterforce to the ubiquitous world of outdoor advertising. But with its canny repetition of images, it's not so different.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Lacayo, Richard “Taking it to the Streets”, Time, October 16, 2005. Last accessed December 7, 2010 at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1118377,00.html>

2 Ling, Rich and Scott W. Campbell, ed., “The Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile Communication Practices”(New Burnswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009). Pg. 71

3 Lacayo, Richard “Taking it to the Streets”, Time, October 16, 2005. Last accessed December 7, 2010 at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1118377,00.html>

If we were to classify this movement, we would have to start a new with every wave of new stickers that substitute the faded items from yesteryear; but the messages are there. Politically ambiguous, but poignantly current; intrinsically designed with an unknown brand; lowbrow and hand-made, or manufactured en masse, the common theme is simply the ability to interrupt the natural urban visual landscape, constantly and repeatedly.

### **Stickers' impact on public space**

The explosion of mobile communications technology has facilitated the crossing over of private behavior into the public realm, particularly, of private communications, which are seen "as transcending the constraints of local place and time, often disrupting the social logic of public places."<sup>4</sup>

"As people navigate the urban environment, they selectively display aspects of their public identities to interface with local social and infrastructural resources: swiping a transit card at a ticket wicket or displaying a membership card to get into the gym."<sup>5</sup>

Because of their miniature and mobile nature, these devices are designed to invade the visual plane of the city dweller; the individual walking along the sidewalk on a busy street, perhaps coming home from work, or going to a music venue, or walking to a nearby coffee shop to work, or simply engaging his or her neighborhood with the most ancient of transportation mechanisms.

As Rich Ling and Scott W. Campbell illustrate, the modern day city dweller engages the public space by incorporating mobile media in the form of phones, mp3 players, cameras, and other portable media devices into the public space; particularly by interfacing with different locations and infrastructures in the city.<sup>6</sup>

"Portable information devices provide opportunities for personalization of public and semi-public spaces in the form of cocooing and encampments, but also in the form of individualized relationships to commercial establishments."<sup>7</sup>

Private and public spaces are merging with the use of these mobile communication devices; so just as well as an individual transports a personal phone conversation from a private space as is a bedroom or living room to a public space as is the sidewalk, the sticker artist must find a way to disrupt the visual public landscape. "Private communications via the mobile phone were seen as transcending the

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4 Ling, Rich and Scott W. Campbell, ed., "The Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile Communication Practices" (New Burnswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009). Pg. 67

5 Ling, Rich and Scott W. Campbell, ed., "The Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile Communication Practices" (New Burnswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009). Pg.

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6 Ibid

7 Ling, Rich and Scott W. Campbell, ed., "The Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile Communication Practices" (New Burnswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009). Pg.

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constraints of local place and time, often disrupting the social logic of public places.”<sup>8</sup>

Nearly all streetscapes in the world’s cities are dotted with public utility devices, from the simple street name post, to the traffic light, to the stop sign. All of these ancillary properties form part of the place simply known as the street or road. Because these surfaces are property of the city, they are in effect, property of no one. The city might make efforts to upkeep, install, remove and upgrade them, but not one person can lay claim to them.

Thanks to their exposed nature, these different public surfaces have then become the perfect target for sticker artists. “Civic leaders haven’t figured out how to stop this flood of guerrilla art. And the removal efforts have not been particularly effective, leaving the fading, handmade stickers of yesteryear posted next to the latest mass produced masterpieces.”<sup>9</sup>

When moving around the city, an individual establishes a form of territory by what Ling and Campbell call cocooning, encapsulating themselves with media, isolating their attention to the music they consume via headphones, or the videos they watch on their smart phones, or the video games they carry in their pocket. However isolated he or she may be, this individual is transporting themselves around the city and so the sticker artist must find a way to penetrate that isolated chamber of media and do so in a way that attracts the reader.

“Though the stickers often evoke themes of urban alienation and isolation, their effect is precisely to counter such feelings. Walking along the streets, one takes comfort from the camaraderie represented by such a large community, and the fact that so many individuals have found a means of expressing themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

These new location-free mobile communication devices are making place and distance irrelevant; instead they are focusing on the social element of interaction within a public space. As such, and as Drew Hemment points out in “The Mobile Effect,” “the fabric of the urban environment and even the contours of the Earth may become a canvas.”<sup>11</sup> This urban environment, of course, includes the various public utility surfaces that sticker artists use.

“Beyond leaving a graffiti mark, the stickers provoke an open-ended interpretation process and a desire to scour the urban landscape searching for more.”<sup>12</sup> In a way, stickers become part of the identity of a street or block, and by extension, they become part of the identity associated with the neighborhood and its inhabitants. The better-designed samples quickly stand out, particularly those that do not purport to market any one product or message in particular.

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Blewitt, Daniel “sticker shock” *Print* 59, 3, May/June 2005 pg. 66

11 Hemment, Drew “The Mobile Effect”, *Convergence* 11: 32. Pg. 33

12 Moleski, Charles “Sticker Shock: Artists’ Stickers” *Art Papers* 23 No. 350 May-June 1999

“The social outcomes of people engaging in private, mobile phone talk in public spaces is just one element in a much larger array of technosocial practices that mold public space to accommodate and trace personal identity and experience.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Euclid Avenue in Little 5 Points**

Euclid Avenue cuts along the heart of the Little 5 Points neighborhood of Atlanta. It is one of the most walkable districts in the city. This neighborhood is known for its eclectic vibe, where street vendors and artists criss-cross with concert-goers, shoppers, skaters, and other city folk. Several storefronts face the street, and most businesses keep their windows and doors open, feeding the ambient sounds of city life in a very similar way to what Shuhei Hosokawa describes as *musica mobilis* in “The Walkman Effect.”<sup>14</sup>

Almost every city-owned object along Euclid Avenue is prime real estate for sticker bombers, used as canvases to attach their adhesive devices; these street signs, light posts, parking meters, and pedestrian traffic lights all bear the signs of various campaigns that have come and gone.

Some signs have been completely encapsulated by the sticker art, like an old city-owned slab of aluminum, overgrown with vinyl kudzu. And yet, these stickers remain, fading away by virtue of the elements, having served by their authors, ignored by the city, embraced by the regulars as an iconic part of the neighborhood.<sup>15</sup>

They are part of a campaign by visual artists to claim public space just as “[p]eople are mobilizing private media infrastructures within public infrastructures to momentarily claim them for personal space.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Of one, many**

There are essentially two types of processes for making stickers and each is then used in various ways. There are the homemade stickers, where an artist or author overwrites printing labels, shipping labels, or U.S. postal service mailing labels and the like with a new slogan. This is the lo-fi, cheap approach. Then there are the manufactured stickers, where a desktop or industrial printer is used to cut up large sheet of adhesive vinyl into individual stickers. Of these then artists and authors (or marketers) create three kinds: branding or promotion stickers; artistic decals, or political protests stickers.

Along Euclid, there are several kinds of stickers, mostly selling ambiguous messages of creative identity. Greg Mike’s Loudmouth decal, for example, is a small square

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13 Ling, Rich and Scott W. Campbell, ed., “The Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile Communication Practices”(New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009). Pg. 84

14 Hosokawa, Shuhei “The Walkman Effect”, *Popular Music* Vol. 4, Performers and Audiences (1984), pp. 165-180.

15 Blewitt, Daniel “sticker shock” *Print* 59, 3, May/June 2005 pg. 66

16 Ling, Rich and Scott W. Campbell, ed., “The Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile Communication Practices”(New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009). Pg. 75

vinyl piece, with a blue cartoonish mouth wide open. This sticker is extremely common throughout the city and can be found in both vinyl self-adhesive form and large wheat paper form. Yet there is nothing that identifies the design with the artist, it was only after several visual art exhibits and media interviews that his signature style was recognized as the man behind the loudmouth stickers.

Several other prominent Atlanta street artists have transitioned to the sticker realm. Hense and Sever are two of the most infamous graffiti artists in the city, often spraying large murals visible from interstates, bridges and other streets, but more recently decals bearing each of their signature names have popped up adorning newspaper boxes and telephone poles.

Two other veteran street artist collectives whose work has become ubiquitous in the city are Geist Boy and Urban Medium studio. Geist Boy produces Mr. Fangs, who is a cartoonish character – seemingly a ghost-like creature– with devilish eyes, mischievous grin and pointy teeth<sup>17</sup>. Urban Medium is the design studio behind the popular Che Trooper character, as well as other designs that borrow from the famous Obey Giant campaign started by Shepard Fairey.<sup>18</sup>

Bands are heavily promoted through sticker campaigns, as they're relatively inexpensive to execute and are specifically targeted to reach neighborhoods with the highest concentration of nightlife activity. Little 5 Points is home to various bars, clubs, and concert venues like the Variety Playhouse and the Star bar. Proximity to these types of locations increases the value of a well-placed sticker. Bands and DJs found during a recent excursion through Euclid were Lee Harvey Oswaldt, DJ Apple Juice, and Sonen.

The relatively cheap cost of production for these guerrilla campaigns has become an attractive asset for many commercially branded stickers, and so lost among the collage of band, art, and graffiti decals you'll find adhesives promoting different products. These are mainly clothing boutiques, video game franchises, beer brands, and other types of stores and companies that appeal to the urban audience.

Finally, among the many unidentifiable decals, hand-made adhesives sit on the low-end of the fidelity scale. These depend on pre-manufactured labels, the most common of which is the United States Postal Service priority shipping label.

## **Identity**

The presence of these stickers on a street corner has become a symbol of locality and native culture. What may begin as a solitary piece of vinyl in a parking deck can spread quickly to a light post, or street name sign a few blocks away. Soon enough, they will engulf most of the city's neighborhoods, especially those, as Geisty Boy,

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<sup>17</sup> Mr. Fangs interview. <http://www.mrfangs.com/test3/interview.php> Accessed December 9, 2010

<sup>18</sup> Storey, Samantha "Download, Peel, and Stick, and All the World's a Gallery", The New York Times, September 26, 2004. Last accessed December 9, 2010 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/26/arts/design/26STOR.html>

creator of Mr. Fangs, reveals on his website, that are considered to be abandoned or ignored. To channel Clifford Geertz, channeling Max Webber,<sup>19</sup> the city dweller is a creature suspended in a web of significance he himself has spun, or in this case, pieced together with self-adhesive decals. Urban identity borrows a lot from those webs of messages scattered all over the city streets, and it is the inhabitants of this common space that must make analysis of the plethora of visual stimuli intruding their plane of sight to search for some coherent meaning of what it means to live in the city.

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19 Clifford Geertz, "Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Culture*, (NY: Basic Books, 1973)

"The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (pg. 5)

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