

‘It’s free, it’s fun, it’s not doing any harm’¹: young sticker artists are making the city better

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This essay examines the phenomenon of sticker art in St. Petersburg as a practice that empowers young people and gives them an opportunity to change the city according to their ideas and interests. Young people in Russia are usually considered to be a marginal, deviant group that must be regulated and controlled by government and adults (Omelchenko 2004; Blum 2006).

Urban context illustrates the same patterns. The urban political regime which has been formed in St. Petersburg has been named the ‘growth machines’ (Tykanova and Khokhlova 2015), because of its focus on maximizing benefits from using urban spaces by local authorities and business elites. In such conditions, city dwellers and especially young people have very limited opportunities to influence the urban policy or decision-making process. For them, the urban landscape becomes more hostile, digital, controlled, and as such, it does not reflect young people’s requirements and makes them find alternative means to transform the city space.

The research for this essay investigates one of the means of having impact available for young people – sticker art. Based on Amin and Thrift’s notion of ‘politics of small interventions with large effects’ (Amin and Thrift 2017), consideration is given to the effects of small visual interventions in the city and their influence on the city making process and sticker artists themselves. Moreover, inspired by Asef Bayat’s concept of ‘social non-movements’ (Bayat 2010), this essay applies the view that everyday spatial politics are able to trigger political and social changes in the city.

What is sticker art?

Sticker or, in other words, paper or vinyl with adhesive backing is a medium used by young people for various purposes. Youth subcultures may incorporate stickers in their style as subcultural markers (Borden 1999) and thus demonstrate their belonging to a specific culture. This essay focuses on stickers and sticker art that is the branch of graffiti (or, according to Macdonald, sticker art can be classified as street art because it is oriented on a wider audience than graffiti (Macdonald 2001)) constituted by practices of creating and putting stickers in the city.

Stickers may show a character, font style, symbol or nickname appropriated or invented and produced by a sticker artist. This activity is considered to be a popular street culture spread around the world, as well as an art form: stickers can be seen both on the streets and in the museums (Shirvanee 2006). However, sticker artists acknowledge that stickers placed in the city take on additional meaning through producing a new type of relationship with the urban space for both an artist and a viewer. Charles Moleski in his *Sticker Shock*’s review notes that “the stickers provoke an open-ended interpretation process and a desire to scour the urban landscape searching for more” (Marecki 2014).

Shepard Fairey, a street artist and the author of the famous sticker with the text "OBEY" and image of Andre the Giant, in his manifesto of sticker art describes the sticker as a tool which provokes questioning of one’s surroundings that are taken for granted, triggering new reactions and interpretations of a familiar environment.

Using the example of Singaporean sticker artist SKLO, Researcher Adelina Ong explains how stickers can reflect the local character of the city dwellers in the urban space and reshape its aesthetics (Ong 2016).

Methodology

The data for this essay are derived from ethnographic work, which took place from June to October 2016 in St. Petersburg (interviews were collected jointly with researchers of the Center For Youth Studies (National Research University Higher School of Economics) within the framework of the project “Digital Youth In The Media City” (DiMe, 2016-2018) supported by the Kone foundation), and from October to November 2018. The data include in-depth interviews (6 females, 13 males; aged 12-30), participation in sticker-artists’ events (jams, festivals), and walking with research participants around the city while they were applying their stickers. As part of the DiMe project, in May 2018, sticker artists participated in a photo shoot (photographer Patrik Rastenberger) for the art-research exhibition ‘Visible Invisibility’. During this photo shoot we were shown their city and their places. This method gives participants an active role in research and contributes to the analysis of the sticker artists’ perspective on the city and their position within it (Kennely 2017).

Results

In St. Petersburg, sticker art appeared in early 2000 and nowadays this urban youth culture has found a number of participants and fans. A lot of sticker artists consider their activity as a part of hip hop culture and they concurrently make other forms of street art (posters, murals, etc.), or graffiti. There is no strong or established community of sticker artists in St. Petersburg, but sticker artists form the situational community through common events, online communication, exchange of stickers, common stickering practices, and jointly produced stickers. Thus, sticker art seems both a collective and individual practice which allows engagement with the material environment through interaction with urban surfaces and objects, as well as engagement with a community of young people, who share the same values and ideas.

Sticker artists represent their stickers as positive items designed to make the city more beautiful and not to do

any harm. Stickers are usually placed on gray surfaces, reverse side of road signs, poles, fences, and in abandoned places. However, the materiality of a sticker (small size, temporality, easy removal), relatively small number of active sticker-artists, and absence of the culture of horizontal communicative relations between the city dwellers through street art in St. Petersburg (Samutina and Zaporozhets, 2017) make them invisible for the majority of the city dwellers and produce a small contribution to the formation of the visual appearance of the city. Nevertheless, sticker art is a step towards democratization of the urban life, in particular, through transformation of perception among those who produce stickers and put them in urban space.

The majority of sticker artists in St. Petersburg describe sticker art as a peripheral activity in their life as opposed to graffiti, graphic design, etc. Most of them do not put in stickers any political agenda or statements, protest or claims on right to the city. The practices of stickering simply penetrate into their everydayness and has become a repeated action, a part of artists’ personal life they perform in a public space routinely. As a result, it is a way for them to transform their status in the city from a follower of the existing city order to an artist/creator, who constructs another city image and representations, through which other behavior models are produced. On the one hand, sticker-artists reinterpret city as a museum², in which sticker is an art object, and sticker-artist is an author. The metaphor of a museum gives the city special value reflected in the sticker-artists’ citizenship through the rhetoric of care and responsibility to the city. On the other hand, permanent city exploration and interaction with the urban space, involvement in urban communication with other sticker-artists contribute to domestication of the city space and its reinterpretation in terms of home. Both of these metaphors illustrate how sticker artists reconfigure optic, through which they perceive the city, and due to this new point of view they transform the city and themselves.

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Notes

1 - The quote was taken from the video 'Stick to it', URL <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL89TeQxlaoWPztK2Ks1wdpbctP-10Okfa>

2 - Despite the fact that this essay uses the category of museum to compare to the street, it is important to note that, according to sticker artists, there are no experts or formal selection of stickers/artworks on the street.

