



# Introduction

## Towards an Aesthetics of Adhesive Art

Carlo McCormick

Since the advent of Modernism, Western culture has had a taste for novelty. As the twentieth century progressed, the avant-garde created ever more arch gestures. Concurrently, the rise of new genres and the crisis brought on by the supposed death of painting engendered a search for alternative, less traditional materials. The availability of increasingly affordable, industrially manufactured technologies only accelerated this propensity. Somewhere along this historical arc—roughly around the time Keith Haring came along—the artists' sticker had become a possibility in the creative lexicon. It is undeniable that this now-prolific medium belongs to such a lineage. Stickers, however, are most often created outside of the limited formal context of visual art. The history of popular culture is redolent with myriad strategies for utilizing the inherent qualities of the medium—often by various youth subcultures, and often with the intention of intervening within the marketplace.

In turn, many of these strategies have been tremendously appealing to contemporary artists. Sure such experimentation has led our culture to the point where any variety of material mayhem—from a T-shirt, a toy, or a mock commodity—can serve as a canvas for self-expression, but it is clear that the ascendancy of multiply produced adhesive images results from precedent, not accident. Stickers are a distant cousin to decalomania (from the French *décalcomanie*)—the process and product of transferring an image onto any surface. Invented around 1750 by a French lithographer living in London, the term decalomania was shortened to the now more popular *decal*. Though when the process first hit the US, the word was Americanized—perhaps out of a fear that kids would never be able to pronounce the damn French word—to the whimsically garbled *cockamamie*, which we still treasure for its unique ability to conjure the outré and the bizarre. This means of easily transferring images has been profoundly alluring in both the fine art world and in popular culture. The technique was popularized by the ceramic transfer craze of the 1870s, and was later favored by Surrealists, such as Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer, during the '30s and '40s. In the '50s and '60s, King Features Syndicate produced a brilliant bit of kids marketing: a

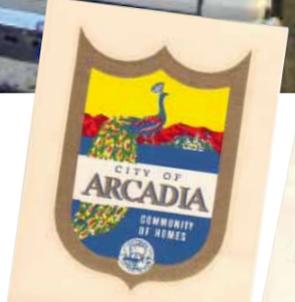
series of decals featuring the image of Flash Gordon, among many of the popular comics distributor's other characters. This campaign, more than any other use of the decal technique, is most directly responsible for the multitude of cutesy Snoopy, Barbie, and Disney stickers—as well as the slightly more transgressive temporary tattoos—circling the globe today. A medium more in line with the intrinsic character of artists' stickers is their most obvious precedent: bumper stickers. Nearly as old as the automobile itself, this public form of personal expression began as bumper signs, cardboard, or tin placards affixed to cars with wire or string. By the postwar era, these signs had morphed into the now-ubiquitous poetics of the American roadscape when a wily Kansan entrepreneur began producing the missives in 1946 on a newly invented adhesive-backed self-sticking paper, which often featured another post-war innovation: Day-Glo ink. A medium driven by textual content much more than form or graphic content, bumper stickers have a hold on our imaginations that must be tied to our limitless desire to spout our opinions in each other's faces. One of the most enduring tools of political campaigns, bumper stickers have advertised seemingly everything: one's national alle-

Decals courtesy of Joyce Hewitt: <http://www.tass.com/stores/vpjh/>

giance, a family's favorite tourist spot, sports teams, schools—or any number of institutional organizations—as well as slogans that have had a tremendous effect on a variety of issues, including the antiwar movement, human rights, ecology, driving protocol, and religion (HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS). A mode of free expression for the people, the bumper sticker was first to seize upon the sticker medium's dual capacity for political polemics and irreverent humor. While it is easy to see how the agitprop nature of the medium has inspired a number of politically minded artists to take it up, the fact that so many stickers are whimsical and absurdly humorous has had an equal impact on the kinds of strategies artists typically employ when using them. The current prominence stickers now enjoy must be largely attributed to the phenomenal success of baseball card manufacturer Topps's launch of "Wacky Packages" in 1967. Under the direction of a not-yet-famous Art Spiegelman, who employed a number of his colleagues from the world of underground comics, including Bill Griffith and Kim Deitch, these trading-card-with-sticker sets continued the parodic assault on American consumer culture begun by *Mad Magazine*. By the '70s they defined the cynicism with which kids viewed mainstream culture. With B.K. Taylor's work on "Odd Rods," custom car culture stickers, which began to be produced by Donruss in 1969, and Topps's "Garbage Pail Kids" created by Spiegelman and Mark Newgardner in 1985, comics artists set a tone for stickers as a subversive, low-brow intervention on status quo values that is evident in the kinds of sticker art being made today. Beyond this brief survey of the history of stickers and their relationship to visual art and popular culture, the ephemeral, disposable, and imminently accessible character of the art form bears consideration, as these inherent qualities are attributable to the medium's

significance within cultural production. These same qualities are also manifest in many adolescent subcultures, particularly punk's do-it-yourself ethos and urban youth expressions like skateboarding and graffiti, as well as being espoused by contemporary artists searching for a more democratic and infinitely reproducible medium. It is certainly not by chance that many of the most prominent practitioners of sticker art come from the graff and skate cultures, for the sticker is not only one of the primary vehicles for these cultures' imagery and sensibility, it also embodies the immediacy, transportability, and visceral urgency of these lifestyles. For whatever level of adoption it may eventually attain within the fine art world, the sticker—from the vinyl cut decal to the impromptu craft of appropriating mailing labels and "Hello My Name Is..." tags—will

always predominantly be a mode of expression for graffiti and street artists. But we must be sensitive to the efforts of artists who most often ply their trade in galleries and museums, as this debased medium has become a way for them to reach a wider audience. As such, the sticker is its own kind of curious artist multiple, not meant for the primacy of art market institutions. By virtue of being so portable, populist, and affordable the sticker is, rather, a gift to the community of antagonistic ideas that haunt the fringes of our more traditionally minded arts institutions. Carlo McCormick is a curator, cultural critic, and the author of numerous books. He is currently the senior editor at Paper Magazine.



## Stickers Rule

Shepard Fairey

Stickers rule. When I pause to think about it, stickers have changed my life. It's hard to believe that paper and vinyl with adhesive backing can do so much. Repetition works, and stickers are a perfect medium to demonstrate this principle. As long as stickers are being put up faster than they weather or are cleaned, they are accumulating. For cities, it's a constant maintenance battle. People also seem unable to resist the urge to stick them on their belongings: car, stereo, skateboard, guitar, and the list goes on. What's on stickers doesn't even have to be that cool; they still manage to make their way into every nook and cranny on the planet.

I grew up in South Carolina where graffiti was nonexistent, with the exception of the usual DARNELL LOVES SHANICE or GO BOBCATS. I did, however, start to notice skateboard and punk rock stickers here and there as soon as I took interest in these two things at the beginning of 1984. Since my friends were into punk and skateboarding as passing fads (only momentarily distracting them from their paths as respectable preps), I found sticker sightings an encouraging sign that there were more dedicated proponents of punk and skate culture lurking somewhere in the city. Stickers were evidence that I wasn't living in a total void. I wanted stickers as badges of my culture.

At first, I would just buy skate stickers and put them on my stuff. I couldn't even figure out how to get punk stickers, so I learned how to draw all the band logos. Then my mom bought a copier for the business she ran out of our house. It was on. I could copy graphics from my skate mags and album covers onto Crack 'n Peel and make my own stickers. Pretty soon, everything I owned was covered with them. At the same time, I was making paper-cut stencils of skate and band logos for spray paint and silkscreen application. These activities continued through high school, less as a way to make art than as a way to avoid actually having to pay for stickers and T-shirts, many of which were not available in South Carolina anyway.

In 1988, I moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to attend the Rhode Island School of Design. I immediately linked up with all the punks and skaters. Stencils and stickers were business as usual, but with the addition of some more personalized alterations of the graphics I would rip off. Providence had a tremendous art and music scene com-

pared to what I was used to, and stickers were everywhere. There were tons of band stickers, political-cause stickers (mostly college activism), and, most interesting to me, a few art stickers and "Hello My Name Is..." stickers. A lot of the art stickers begged the question: What is this about? It was at this point that I began to ponder the sticker as a means of expression and communication for an individual, instead of just representing a band, company, or movement.

For years, I had defined myself through associations with things that represented skate and punk culture. This path to forming an identity appealed in high school, but did little to alleviate the existential problem of anonymity once I had left high school and entered into an art school environment full of "alternative" people just like me. I liked the idea of having my own sticker, but couldn't think of something clever enough to be worth executing. I looked at it almost as seriously as getting a tattoo. I paid very close attention to stickers and I would try to figure out who and what was behind any sticker I saw. I even started photographing flyers, stickers, and other forms of graffiti. During a museum trip to New York that freshman year of college, I saw graffiti in risky places that gave me new respect for the dedication of the writers. Stickers and tags coated every surface in New York City. I left the city inspired, but I was somehow convinced graffiti was something you had to be born into, like a Black or Hispanic mafia, and a pale cracker like me could never be accepted in that culture. I did, however, think that I could make stickers and accomplish some of the same things.

That summer, I was working at a skate shop in Providence called The Watershed. The boss liked my homemade T-shirts and asked me to design some stickers and tees for Team Shed, as we called ourselves. This provided some artistic validation, but I was still looking for my own thing.

Everything fell into place when my friend Eric asked me to teach him how to make paper-cut stencils. I stumbled upon a funny picture of Andre the Giant, and I told Eric that Team Shed was played and he should make a stencil of Andre so we could be Andre's posse. He tried to cut the image with an X-Acto knife, but aborted the mission in frustration. I finished the job and wrote ANDRE THE GIANT HAS A POSSE on one side, with his height and weight, 7'4", 520 LBS., on the other side. The first "Giant" sticker was born, with many more to come.

The "Giant" stickers started as a joke, but I became obsessed with sticking them every-

where, both as a way to be mischievous and also put something out in the world anonymously that I could still call my own. Just as I had been made curious by many of the stickers I'd seen, I now had my own sticker to taunt and/or stimulate the public. The sticker takeover of Providence only took that summer. The next fall, the local indie paper printed a picture of the sticker, offering a reward to the person who could reveal its source and meaning. The sticker campaign had worked so quickly locally that I decided to strike out for Boston and New York. The ball had begun to roll, but the amazing thing is that I almost lacked the self-confidence to try to put something of my own out there. I didn't even think I could make an impact in Providence, and it's somewhat of a fluke that the "Giant" sticker stimulated me to try. However, once the first domino fell, I was addicted and had my sights set on world domination through stickers.

It amazed me just how liberating and easy stickering was. At first, I would just run off a few hundred stickers a week at a copy center, using their sticker material. Then I figured out that I could get sticker material at an office supply store for half the price. Paper stickers were good for indoor use, a nightmare to remove, but weathered too quickly outdoors. I was taking some screenprinting classes, so I decided to look into making vinyl stickers. I bought vinyl ink and vinyl from a screen-print supply wholesaler in Boston. The vinyl ink was ill toxic, but by printing them myself, the vinyl stickers worked out to be way cheaper than the paper ones. I also liked the confusion factor with having a low-fi image printed on the more professional vinyl material. Every sheet of stickers I printed felt like I was making the world a little smaller: I mean, all those stickers were gonna end up somewhere. From '89 to '96, I hand-printed and hand-cut over a million stickers. When I moved to California I decided I needed to keep the brain cell I had left, so I stopped printing with vinyl ink and started sending my stickers out to a printer.

As my production methods improved, so did my distribution. I began sending stickers to several enthusiastic friends all over the country who had caught sticker fever. Some writers only want their stickers to track their actual footsteps. For example, I printed some stickers for Phil Frost and he got mad at me for putting them up for him and told me he only wanted his stickers on the street as a document of where he'd traveled. I just wanted my stickers to go as far and wide as possible. I began to run classified ads in *Slap* skateboard magazine and the punk zine

*Flipside*. The ads had my images and said, "Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for stickers and the lowdown." I was building a great grassroots network of people. The only problem was that I was losing money on all of the stickers and ads. The stickers were always intended as an art project, and part of the charm was that there was nothing for sale, but I had to make some money back to keep producing. My solution was to ask for a mandatory donation of five cents per sticker (a price I basically maintain for black-and-white stickers to this day) and to produce some T-shirts to sell. That's how my humble sticker and T-shirt business got started. Almost every art and financial opportunity in my life has stemmed from my stickers and their poster and stencil relatives.

The art of stickers isn't just about what's on them, but also how they are integrated into the environment. As Marshall McLuhan said, the medium is the message, and depending on the environment, a sticker can say any of a number of things. Sometimes it's a way of claiming ownership, like planting a flag on the moon—*this is my spot*. But it can also be a way to comment on the environment it's placed in, or to establish some sort of relationship between the viewer and the environment. The more I put up stickers, the more I thought about how they created interactions and how these differed from the interactions people typically have with urban environments.

Then, in 1995, I saw the movie *They Live*, a campy sci-fi movie about a guy who finds some mysterious sunglasses, and when he puts them on he sees the sinister subliminal messages lurking below every seemingly harmless advertisement and piece of propaganda (being disseminated by aliens, of course). The moral of the story is that things aren't always as they seem, and if we take everything we see and hear at face value, we're just allowing ourselves to be manipulated into giving away our money and power. My goal with the "Giant" campaign was all about getting people to question things, and I loved the idea of juxtaposing something harmless with something sinister, but flipping it around. I didn't have to look any further than a billboard in *They Live* for the message: OBEY. On a sticker, it has so much versatility. When stuck somewhere conspicuous, it can grab people's attention and bring the whole environment into focus: the sticker is probably not the only thing around telling people to obey, even if it's the only thing saying it directly. When stuck somewhere less noticeable, it creates an effect of ubiquity: people think, 'If this sticker is here, it must be everywhere,' and it becomes a sort of Big Brother symbol.

However, there's more to strategically placing a sticker than just the message it

sends. Cleanup crews are always on the lookout for stickers, but there are ways to prolong a sticker's lifespan. The most common placements for stickers are poles and crosswalk boxes at eye level. These are also the fastest places to be cleaned. Climbing a couple feet higher really weeds out the city workers and vigilante citizens who aren't dedicated to their jobs. Slightly bigger stickers are great for these high spots. Necessity is the mother of invention, right? I got so sick of my stickers being peeled that I looked into the kind of vinyl that the government uses for registration stickers so they can't be stolen off of license plates. The stuff is called destructible vinyl, and flakes off in teeny pieces when you try to peel it. It costs about twice as much, but is very worth it in some cleaner cities. Making stickers that are camouflaged keeps them running, too. In New York, locksmiths put small contact info stickers in all the doorways. ESPO made some of his own, which blend right in to most of the public but stand out to writers. I've made take-offs subverting the typical YOU ARE UNDER SURVEILLANCE stickers. They look so official; they usually stay up, even in conspicuous places. I also made fake California Department of Weights and Measures stickers like the ones that go on all the gas pumps—they only change them once a year. The possibilities with sticker placement are endless.

A little sticker can be a whole lot of things, and do a whole lot of things. It can be a badge of culture or a badge of support for a cause (a major reason why stickers have been a big part of my efforts to support causes like Obama's 2008 campaign, the campaign to free the Burmese political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyii, and the push for clean, renewable energy in America). A sticker can be a personal emblem, but it can also be shared with friends or distributed to a mass market. It can carry an overt statement, or be a statement in its presence alone. It can customize anything. It can be produced on any scale. It can alter a landscape or blend in seamlessly. And it can go just about anywhere you want it to.

*Shepard Fairey is the artist behind the iconic, ubiquitous "Obey Giant" campaign that helped change the way people see art. His creative empire includes the branding, marketing, and design firm Studio Number One, and the Subliminal Projects art gallery.*

A version of this article appeared in *Phototism*, May 2003, and in *Supply & Demand: The Art of Shepard Fairey*.

