

An Essay on Slap Stickers



text and photos by

Peter Toubanos

There are a number of hobbies in which being observant is key. Many people find a calm in waking up early and heading to the local nature preserve for a birdwatch. Others spend hours staring up at the night sky practicing amateur astronomy, in search of the stars. For myself, I've spent much of the last year ogling the stickers plastered around my city. I'm in awe of how many talented (and not so talented) artists take to the streets to get their designs wherever they can fit. It's an ever-expanding collaboration in which participants come and go and art is temporary. Being on the lookout for tiny bits of art in unexpected corners will have you slowly moving about your city and draw your attention to spaces you might glance over otherwise.



Bring up “slap stickers” in your next conversation about art. Chances are pretty high that whoever you’re speaking with is not going to be able to tell you what slap stickers (or “slaps” for short) are. Even esteemed connoisseurs of contemporary art might get tripped up. You might be surprised to learn that slaps constitute one of the most prevalent and accessible art movements in contemporary history. Prevalent that is - if you’re paying attention. Next time you’re taking a walk around your city, take a close look at the backs of street signs, railings on an overpass, abandoned payphones, ice boxes, ATM machines, fire hydrants, bike racks, and utility poles. You’ll see slap stickers. Whether scrawled onto a postage sticker or neatly printed from a computer-made graphic design, vandals of all levels of experience and talent are compelled to fasten stickers to any public surface for the world to enjoy.

Slaps are the realization of decades of disinvestment of funds away from the public sector and funneled into private hands. Public surfaces are plastered with vandals’ art for years on end with no serious investment in cleanup. Simultaneously the vandals have taken it upon themselves by mass producing objects at a low cost to make a name for themselves. The concept mirrors the emergence of overworking and hustler culture. Sticker artists have found a way of achieving fame and notoriety in a culture that reinforces the importance of the individual. Art movements have diverted from the underground to an increasingly commercial and inaccessible place for most artists to make a name for themselves, so they turn to something a bit more subversive, slap stickers. We can thank the neoliberal project of austerity for this exciting

underground art form.

. All this infrastructure that stickers are fastened to is supposedly “public”, but it still is treated as private property. Vandalism is disallowed and in many cases harshly criminalized. We have the illusion of participatory government, but much like how citizens cannot freely wander into the the halls of Congress and make demands, we are also not free to make aesthetic decisions on infrastructure.

In a prior life, I was working as a gallery invigilator at a prestigious blue chip gallery that shall not be named. Invigilator is a fancy word for an individual who stands in front of art, makes sure visitors stay “behind the line”, and answer their various questions. On one Friday afternoon, a man came up to me and informed me that the mosaic on the wall reminded him of a French philosopher he had been reading named Gilles Deleuze. I was of course polite and courteous. He seemed well-meaning enough. I’m not sure what the connection he was seeing between the notorious Marxist Deleuze, and a \$400,000 mosaic that’s likely just going to be collecting dust in a freeport in Switzerland, Delaware, or some other tax haven in the future.

It’s too easy to get cynical about contemporary art. On a bike ride between Far Rockaway, Queens and Manhattan, I pedaled past the Brooklyn Museum on Eastern Parkway. Draped between the columns were two banners promoting separate exhibitions, “Climate in Crisis: Environmental Change in the Indigenous Americas” and “KAWS: WHAT PARTY”, a totally laughable juxtaposition of ideas. How could anyone totally separate KAWS

from the destruction of climate, when the contemporary art market has plainly turned into an outlet for money laundering for the world's wealthiest 1% of individuals. "The KAWS Album", a KAWS painting based on a Simpsons spoof of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band sold for a whopping \$14.7 million dollars at Sotheby's in 2019. KAWS has become a posterboy for the commercialization of fine art, creating hundreds of toys and mini sculptures that anyone with an extra \$600-\$2000 laying around could drop a few pennies on.

The point of this bicycling anecdote is not to clown on KAWS. I actually like KAWS, and tend to appreciate art that appeals to a wide audience more than the grumpiest art critics care to. It's easy to forget that KAWS's vandalist origins as a graffiti kid from Jersey City painting rooftops and subverting bus stop advertisements. KAWS is among the very small percentage of street artists who found a way to monetize their work, and ultimately had the popularity of his work spiral out of control. I am not critiquing KAWS, but rather the Brooklyn Museum for asking me to take seriously its commitment to highlighting the impact of climate change on indigenous communities, when it simultaneously wants to showcase an artist that embodies the art market in all its unapologetic excesses of capitalism. There comes a point where it is no longer tenable to claim to care about environmental issues without being anti-capitalist. Of course, it is in the best interest of The Brooklyn Museum to obfuscate the relationship between capital and ecological destruction. After all, their "feminist" art wing is named after Elizabeth Sackler of the notorious Sackler family. Most museums have no interest in critiquing capital. The outlets to create

a platform for politics that are skeptical of capitalism are becoming fewer and far between in the traditional art market.



There was briefly a moment where art world utopianism seemed like it was on the horizon, particularly when net art and post-internet art were having a moment. The dream of a contemporary situational international. Much like the early tech boom of the 1970s, early adopters of this art movement saw democratic potential. In 1976, Bill Gates published The Open Letter to Hobbyists, a brief message to PC hobbyists who he was unhappy with for pirating Altair BASIC software, leaving Gates with less cash in royalties than he'd like. The Open Letter to Hobbyists changed the tides in a once burgeoning collectivist without the notion of ownership. Granted the majority of hobbyists at this time were a privileged few who had access to computing machines, usually academics. Gates takes a harsh tone with his readers.

“As the majority of hobbyists must be aware, most of you steal your software. Hardware must be paid for, but software is something to share. Who cares if the people who worked on it get paid?”



So there it is. Bill Gates had the grand vision of paying for software and outside of the open-source scene. Right now you can spend your money purchasing the rights to use Microsoft Word. This letter pre-dated the Computer Software Act of 1980 which is when software was officially recognized as intellectual property in the eyes of the United States law. Popular Silicon Valley mythology might have you believe that it was Gates' talent of making great computer software that has made him the world's richest man. His wealth is the direct result of his eagerness to push for monetization of software before it became common practice. In another timeline, BASIC could have been free to distribute and use like Linux, Wikipedia, or Mozilla Firefox are today.





Following this shift in ideology, the shift of “cool” also began. Large corporations were begat of the libertarian mindset of the early days of computing. Think Steve Jobs in his early hippie days. Naturally, large tech companies began to embrace “cool” aesthetics. Startups can supply pizza on Fridays, but not worker’s rights.

Early artists involved with internet art were enamored with the utopian possibilities of the internet mirroring early computing enthusiasts’ politics. Two in particular, Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, authored *Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)*, which serves as a useful document in trying to place where these artists’ heads were at during the days when the internet was still a fresh technology. Net.art was their collective, not to be conflated with the general term of internet art. A few key points stand out in their manifest in retrospect.

“The utopian aim of closing the ever widening gap between art and everyday life, perhaps, for the first time, was achieved and became a real”

“maintaining independence from institutional bureaucracies”

“T.A.Z. (temporary autonomous zone) of the late 90s: Anarchy and spontaneity”

Net.art as a collective faded into obscurity, though general interest in internet art continued for years to come, and the influence of net.art is not to be understated. The utopian visions of a few artists inspired many more to come. But, what happened? The internet has not become the level playing field that its early enthusiasts had hoped for. It's the complete opposite. There was at a point much excitement over the flattening of the world as it pertained to the art world. Art was a conversation happening across the web and galleries and fairs were going global. You're not quite an A-class city unless you've got your own Hauser & Wirth or David Zwirner. There was a mirage of building an imagined community around art capable of evangelising artists' critical theory technobabble across international boundaries, but simultaneously the world's wealthiest individual saw their pocketbooks grow to unfounded sizes. Ironically, net art had a huge retrospective at The New Museum while the staff was in a spat with the museum management over forming a union.

The new frontier of online art is the emergence of non-fungible tokens, NFTs as most know them. With the development of blockchain technology, we could potentially be looking at a future where piracy becomes more difficult, the inevitable outcome of a digital art market that was quickly commodified. Blockchain encryption prevents data from being copied allowing users to own individual pieces of data. In comparison, take a .jpeg file of an artwork. This .jpeg can be copied and shared to any device that displays .jpegs. Now consider this same .jpeg as a non-fungible token stored on a blockchain. Now only one “genuine” copy of this artwork exists because it can no longer be duplicated with the same token.

This creates a situation where digital assets like online images and videos can now be ascribed ownership. As the pace of the corporatization of the internet and general computing accelerates, what little democratic space the internet still holds could be accelerated even greater as blockchain becomes more powerful. The fate of blockchain has yet to be fully realized, but initial signs are all pointing towards a transformation of the internet into a mere capitalist marketplace, as indicated by early art market NFT rush. Some might argue otherwise, and say that art is being democratized through blockchain since artists can make large sums of money avoiding gallerists and selling to a different scene (the NFT market is decidedly more new money “Silicon Valley tech bro” than the typical international galavantier who’s buying the paintings at David Zwirner).

Can NFTs potentially be the next nexus of populist art? Maybe, but all signs are pointing in the other direction. As a principle, it makes sense to use technology against the grueling chug of capitalism, not working within the accepted economic parameters of the technology itself and certainly within a framework of ownership over the free distribution of information. The ownership aspect of NFTs is not aligned with the Marxist ideals leftists should be pushing for.

There might be another art movement that already fulfills the niche of populist art, that is both subversive and easy to get into and there's no need to overcomplicate things with NFTs. It's just that not much of anyone pays attention to this movement. The art market has increasingly become out of touch with everyday people and more catered towards the extremely wealthy, suddenly the tiny bits of design that most people pass by every day without a thought, becomes more interesting. This is where slap stickers fit in.





1. Stickers are easily produced. Even if you can't figure out the logistics of DIY printing, there are plenty of reasonable services that will print your design for you. If that proves too costly, pick up some free Priority Mail stickers at your local post office and start drawing away.

2. Stickers can be easily put up with no hassle. Doing graffiti is illegal, and the more time you have to spend putting up your piece, the more likely it is you will be caught. Stickers can be put up in less than one second and the chance of being detected by law enforcement is a virtual zero.

3. Stickers can be traded and distributed unlike tags, throw ups, murals, etc.

Some might say that graffiti is more than an art form. It's a lifestyle. Stephen Duncombe wrote an excellent book analyzing the history and cultural significance of zines titled "Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture". I particularly like a quote regarding the spread of zines into decidedly uncool places, being made from the bedrooms of adult living in their parents' homes in the suburbs due to the unavailability of affordable rents to anyone but yuppies. He writes, "But the fact remains that there is no longer Paris - no longer one, unified coherent and geographical bohemia." Bohemia has been taken over by real estate developers where it becomes unrecognizable besides some relics and callbacks here and there. Think of Target's CBGB homage in the East Village as the quintessential example. I think Duncombe's analysis is useful for understanding what is so fascinating about sticker slapping. When art markets are so inaccessible and gatekept from the general public, an alternative is allowed to thrive in the streets. Art as a product is totally alien from the lifestyle that the typical artist lives.

Consider Karl Marx's theory of alienation which posits that the worker is completely removed from the product of their labor. Artworks sit in the freeports, elite office buildings, or the living rooms of individuals with way too much money, while many of those same artists are living precariously as freelancers, perhaps making just enough money for rent if that. It's not surprising that the gallery stack is unreachable and in most cases undesired by the street artist. Instead it is more enticing to tag public property, and take ownership of what is ours collectively.

Art galleries aren't quite as abundant in many parts of the United States as they are in New York City, where I live. You will, however, find stickers in every metro area in the country if you look hard enough, creeping by suburban strip malls and in far flung forgotten neighborhoods. I've seen the same stickers posted in Manhattan's ultra trendy SoHo and Queens' conservative and semi-suburban Howard Beach.

I imagine that a typical sticker artist has a greater sense of the geography of a city than the politicians and planners who run a city. To be truly great you need intimate knowledge of space. You need to be able to seek out spaces that are visible at eye-level to unsuspecting pedestrians and drivers. While you're doing that you also need to be keenly aware of your surroundings, ensuring that there are no police or other individuals around who might get upset upon seeing an act of vandalism.

Guy Debord writes in *Theory of the Dérive*: "The lessons drawn from dérives enable us to draw up the first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city. Beyond the discovery of unities of ambiance, of their main components and their spatial localization, one comes to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses. One arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence of psychogeographical pivotal points." Perhaps there's something quite profound in the art of slapping stickers. Debord identified the practice of a *dérive* as a tool which freed him from the spectacle, free from the lure of advertisements. If you're looking at stickers instead of billboards and fast food signs, you've successfully deprogrammed your brain from false desires

that are encouraged under a capitalist system. It is unsurprising that several slap stickers I encounter around New York are parodying corporate logos. I've spotted takes on Loews, Rite Aid, Wendy's, Bic, Verizon, Best Buy, Amazon, among others. It's almost like the real life equivalent of the sunglasses from They Live.

Sticker artists have found a way out of both the corporate model, and also outside of the traditional dog eat dog graffiti economy. Those who create slap stickers fit into a sort of leisure subset of artists, who can be involved in something greater than themselves in their own way. I say we embrace this artform. Cover every inch of your city with your slap stickers. If you don't want to do that, at least take a closer look at stickers around your neighborhood. Engage with art made by unknown artists who's best chance at getting seen is through a sticker. It's one of the few remaining ways of engaging with great art movements that hasn't been swallowed whole by the will of the market.







Photos from All 5 Boroughs.

Slaps seen in Bay Ridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, Chelsea, Concourse, Elmhurst, Financial District, Howard Beach, Midtown, Prospect Heights, SoHo, Stapleton, and Upper East Side



