



# CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE JAMMING: REDEFINING COLLAGE AS COLLECTIVE, COMMUNAL, & URBAN

**I**n a creative twist of graffiti methods, stickering appears on city surfaces, garbage receptacles, parking meters, traffic signs, and newspaper boxes. Innovation in design of sticker art collage elements includes use of pre-made mailing labels, name tags, appropriated stickers, purchased pre-made stickers, and/or multiples of original designs to contribute to street artworks.

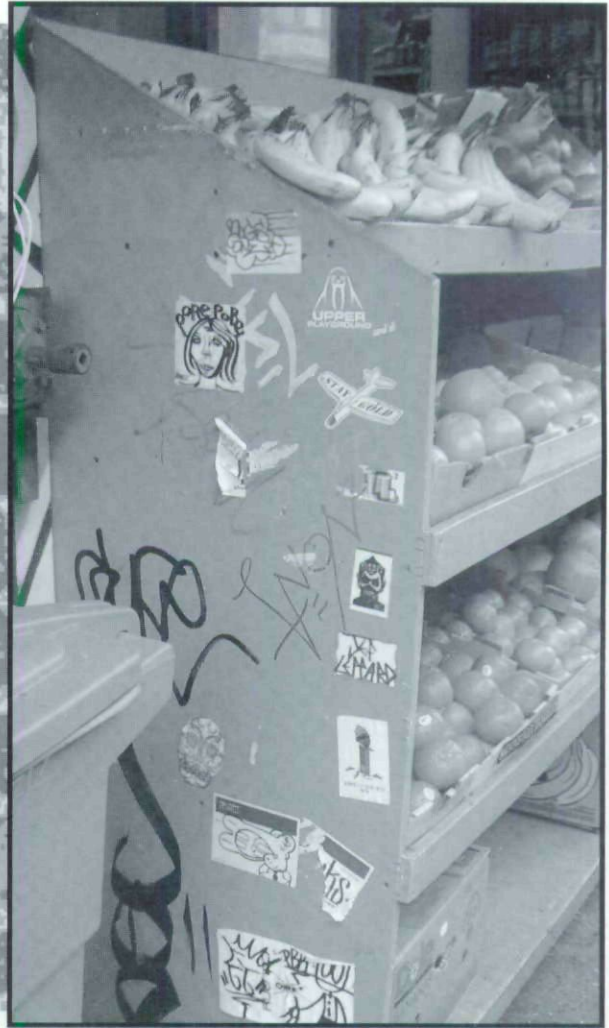
Captivated by this visual culture phenomenon on a visit to the Lower Haight neighborhood of San Francisco in 2004, I photographed 50 examples in less than one hour. These stickerings seemed to generate from anonymous, yet genuine communal and collective artistic collage process. It did not appear that one artist chose to alter anyone else's contribution. Rather, thoughtful choices were made about compositional development when a new sticker was added to these evolving temporal urban works.

I suspected and soon confirmed this type of street art,<sup>1</sup> (visual) culture jamming,<sup>2</sup> sticker bombing,<sup>3</sup> and/or "paper graffiti art" (Walde, 2007) was not unique to San Francisco, but well underway in many major urban centers and starting to appear in smaller urban locales across the world. Appearing in Stockholm as early as 2000, similar commentary regarding the communal feel of this art form was articulated soon after. "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" (Blewitt, 2005, p. 67).

Sticker art provides glimpses into the viscosity of communication in subculture communities of youth and young adults. Once counter culture and now extreme sports enthusiasts such as skaters, snowboarders, boogie-boarders, and surfers seem to have a penchant for stickering. As Mirzoeff asserted (1993, 2005) and Sweeney (2006) rearticulated within an art education context, an important basis of visual culture is that "Many contemporary cultures communicate through and understand each other primarily

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P. 98. Muni Subway Terminal, San Francisco, California, 2006  
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through images" (p. 294). Other sticker art messages include political and/or activist statements or visually represent an artist's identity.

Perhaps this extroverted public version of sticker art is tied to the noted and energetic children's art practice (Szekely, 2000, 2006) in semi-private contexts such as collaging (sticker bombing) objects in their rooms, computer and stereo equipment, lockers, and various items with numerous collected stickers.

Art educators (Kun, 2001; Whitehead, 2004) discuss the necessity of including street art such as graffiti in art curricula, suggest methods, and provide guidance about the added responsibility of tackling visual phenomena linked with vandalism and fraught with legal issues with K-12 students. In turn, thinking about sticker art as a contemporary cousin to graffiti, and continuing documentation on various travels since 2004, these examples from San Francisco, Boise, Madrid, Honolulu, and New York City provide interesting realms for innovative art education inquiry at diverse grade levels. To extend studies, teachers and students may search for related examples, and research abatement practices in their own communities.

Considering new street artworks fosters multiple and new learnings for students. It encourages exploration of urban areas as potential free zones for creative expression while also examining the complex ideals and realities governing freedom of artistic and

cultural expression in public spaces. Such practices may broaden notions of visual culture and increase careful looking and analysis of diverse aesthetic systems. The result of which is compelling and challenging inquiry that enriches and questions both students' definition/s of art and re-considerations of art production and consumption in our world.

Possible inquiry objectives include myriad social, historical, cultural, and political explorations. Facilitated by educators, students may investigate the creation of such artworks by completing visual inventories, conducting research on local interpretations of images, and also establishing meaning within local cultural and global urban collage contexts.

Questions serving as entry points for investigation may include the following:

- Who creates these works/installations/collages?
- How do artists decide how to design a sticker or collage element?
- Who are the intended audiences for these collective images?
- What diverse meanings do these images hold for the makers, viewers and greater society?
- What role does anonymity play in the importance of these visual culture examples?









Lower Haight, San Francisco, California, 2004

- How do these works redefine collage making in a community context?
- How else might art teachers and preservice educators use these examples to teach visual art and culture in K-12 curricula?

Kun, (2001) asked, "Should a child-centered art curriculum that emphasizes personalized learning of students by actively engaging their environment and community, exclude lessons on graffiti?" (p. 21). Similarly, what happens if we do not examine ultra

contemporary visual culture such as sticker art in our art classrooms? What then, might we (not) be teaching about art?

Utilizing the aforementioned inquiry suggestions, students will gain first hand experience in researching new visual culture examples and strengthen their understanding of and relation to contemporary visual culture. These experiences stretch imaginations and increase abilities to create and interpret innovative artworks in the classroom or city. Additionally, many urban students may already be familiar with sticker art and contribute widely to classroom discourse.

To view more exciting examples of contemporary sticker art from around the world in video, search for "sticker art" on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).<sup>4</sup> ■

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Street art "is any art developed in public spaces — that is, "in the streets" — though the term usually refers to art of an illicit nature, as opposed to government sponsored initiatives. The term can include traditional graffiti artwork, stencil graffiti, sticker art, wheatpasting and street poster art, video projection, art intervention, and street installations. Typically, Street Art is used to distinguish contemporary public-space artwork from territorial graffiti, vandalism, and corporate art" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_art)).

<sup>2</sup>Culture jamming "is the act of transforming mass media to produce commentary about itself, using the original medium's communication method. It is a form of public activism which is generally in opposition to commercialism, and the vectors of corporate image. The aim of culture jamming is to create a contrast between corporate or mass media images and the realities or perceived negative side of the corporation or media" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture\\_jamming](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming)). While not a perfect example of culture jamming—the addition of visual to the phrase culture jamming seems to properly describe many acts of stickering, especially the uses of appropriated (USPS, UPS, FedEx, and Hello My Name is...name badges—as well as surplus stickers from community service, anti-drug and/or political campaigns) stickers.

<sup>3</sup>Sticker bombing "Borrowed from graffiti culture, bombing means (a) The art of doing any forms of graffiti; (b) to throw up a huge graffiti piece ... also known as tagging a lot of areas in one night; and (c) when you go out tagging—when you write names or words on various objects in graffiti (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bombing&page=1>).

Consequently, sticker bombing is slang for taking part in a large scale stickering effort with several copies of one sticker or placing several stickers in myriad public spaces.

<sup>4</sup>Recently accessed (June 2007) sticker art videos on You Tube.com:

- Wahoo's Tacos Graffiti Street Art Stickers
- Bombin Sticker Video Urban Medium
- Sticker Graffiti "Peel Here" 2005
- Trailer\_Arte Urbano Mexicano
- BNE Stickers Graffiti on ABC World News
- Sticker Culture 2.0 Animated
- The Bubble Project on ABC World News

## EDITOR'S NOTE

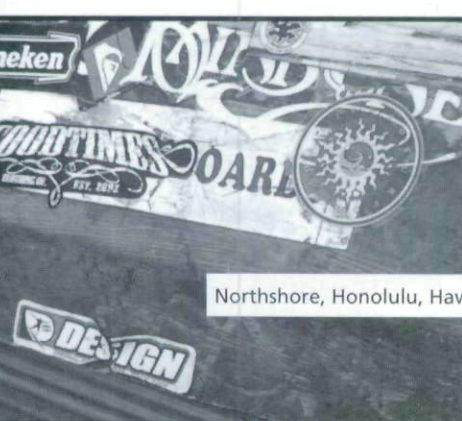
Photos of street art by anonymous artists are courtesy of the author.



La Rasta Market Alley, Madrid, Spain, 2006



Collage close up on Newspaper Box, SF, CA, 2006



Northshore, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2006

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