Simeon Genew

sgenew@wse.krakow.pl
Wyższa Szkoła Europejska im. ks. Józefa Tischnera w Krakowie

CHAPTER 2

Social impact and artistic expression of the street art stickers of Noemis

The subject of this paper – the stickers of Noemis – have been designed and produced by Simeon Genew, a graphic artist residing in Krakow, Poland, who has been actively engaged in street art since 2018 under the pseudonym Noemis. The content of the stickers addresses a range of contemporary social issues that have significant global impact. The present work serves to delineate the social, political, and personal dimensions of the issues that the stickers aim to address. Moreover, the paper aims to explicate the primary and ancillary objectives of the stickers, which involve cultivating awareness of the social problems being presented to the general public, as well as providing a means of combining artistic expression with a therapeutic function for the artist.

I. Street art stickers and their social impact

The contemporary sticker art that adorns various surfaces in public, restricted, or private areas is predominantly part of the street art or urban art movement, which scholars often categorise as a subset of public art. Street art is frequently a form of artistic protest that addresses a range of political and social issues. In Noemis' stickers, the primary goal of the author is to create a social impact, with aesthetics playing a secondary role. Karolina Izdebska's monograph emphasises that street art creators intentionally disrupt the urban environment, subverting established cognitive patterns and directing attention to significant issues that may have been suppressed in the collective memory. Their work can be viewed as a street game that engages the audience in a dialogue. In some instances, the artist's objective

is to entertain through the use of beauty, humour, and irony. (Izdebska, 2021, p. 53). By violating rules of public areas and being a mostly illegal act of creation, street art poses a problem to philosophical accounts of artistic value. Street art works disregard the confines of the art world and aims to be judged for their social usefulness, which is a worrying trend (Simoniti, 2018).

In the case of Noemis' stickers, the chosen social problems are addressed through a unique form of artistic expression. As an act of protest, street art and sticker art, in particular, serve as a means of disrupting established cognitive patterns and draw attention to important issues that may have been suppressed in the collective memory. This type of art creates a public dialogue and encourages individuals to re-evaluate their stance on the issues presented, even if only momentarily. The anonymity of the artist allows the observer to focus on the message rather than the messenger, emphasising the importance of the social impact of the artwork.

When discussing the social impact of art, it is essential to understand the various ways in which it can address social problems. The term 'social problem' refers to various conditions, situations, and events that are perceived in society as painful and requiring a solution. These issues become the subject of interest of the state and are often addressed through various social policies and programmes. Socially engaged art, on the other hand, offers a unique perspective on these problems, aiming to generate social change through creative expression. By stimulating reflection and awareness, the art can prompt individuals to take action and contribute to solving the social problem at hand. Noemis' stickers serve as an example of this type of socially engaged art, with their primary purpose being to create a social impact through artistic expression[1] (Izdebska, 2021, p. 261).

II. Structure of the stickers' message

Noemis' use of visual narrative and text is a deliberate strategy to communicate their intended message. The use of sarcasm and irony in the text serves to engage the observer by challenging their preconceived notions and prompting them to question their beliefs. The simplified graphic sign acts as a hook, capturing the observer's attention and drawing them in to read the accompanying text. This two-phase interaction allows for a deeper understanding of the message presented. The use of English in the stickers is a strategic choice, as it allows for a wider audience to engage with the stickers and the issues they address. However, the use of Polish in certain cases demonstrates an awareness of local issues and a desire to connect with a specific audience. Additionally, the intentional use of 'lolspeak' highlights

---

[1]   Cit. translated by the author, S.G.

the playful and humorous nature of the stickers, while also conveying a message. Overall, the combination of visual narrative and text in Noemis' stickers allows for a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of various social issues.

The stickers are divided into two content categories:

1. Fully original content (drawing and text)
2. Mixed content (collage), consisting of either:
    a) drawing of another creator and Noemis' text
    b) fragment of text of another creator and Noemis' drawing.

III. Authorship

In the context of Noemis' stickers, the author utilises different strategies to sign or not sign the artwork. The stickers from category 1, which address a particular social issue and contain both text and visual elements, are signed with 'Noemis'. This can be seen as a deliberate decision by the artist to take responsibility for the message and to establish a personal brand identity. In contrast, the stickers of mixed content, which include a combination of pre-existing images or texts and Noemis' own artwork, are not signed and created in a passive voice. This can be seen as part of a postmodern mixing culture or collage street art, where the author's identity is less important than the message conveyed by the artwork.

Furthermore, stickers without text, which do not address a particular social issue and simply present fragments of other artworks made by the author, are signed with 'genew.pl'. These stickers are not part of the socially engaged series and can be seen as a way for the artist to promote their personal website or showcase their artistic style without a specific message. The decision to sign or not sign the stickers can be seen as a deliberate choice by the artist to communicate different levels of intention and identity through their artwork.

IV. Technique

The stickers are first sketched with a pencil or black pen and then the image is scanned and digitally enhanced. The text is written with the Bluberry Typeface font, designed by Squarepack, a free font for personal use. This is a simple, raw, handmade, decorative font often categorised as 'children's book' or 'comics'. It has very high readability when used in caps only. The stickers are printed at a local print shop on UV- and water-resistant adhesive paper in A3 format and cut out manually.

In some of the stickers, the image is a photograph of an acrylic painting by the author or a fragment of it.

V. Topics presented on the stickers

1. Global social problems

a) consumerism:

1   2   3

The messages behind 'buy more stuff' (1), 'buy yourself that' (2), and 'how fulfilled are you in your life' (3) are ironic, pointing out one of the problems of the so-called 'first world' – overconsumption and addiction to shopping. All the drawings related to this topic are made by the author.

b) global surveillance and control

4   5   6
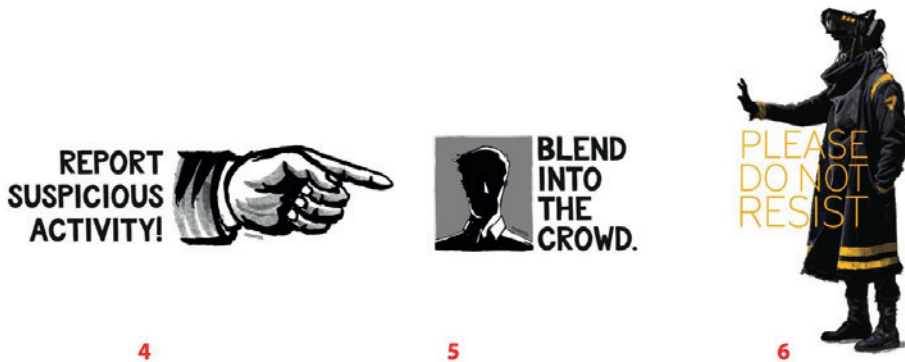
The increasing control of the state and private companies in the form of constant surveillance, facial recognition, and tracking is a violation of privacy. If this is the price that modern society has to pay for security, then the issue is a social problem.

Stickers (4) and (6) are of mixed content. 'Report suspicious activity' is a US slogan from the Cold War era, and 'please do not resist' is a common order used by police forces. All the drawings in this topic are made by the author.

c) social inequality

| 7 | 8 | 9 |

These stickers address the following social problems: the unfair distribution of wealth (7), the patriarchal society (9), and the constant urge for profit (8). Projects (7) and (8) are part of social inequality topics.

These two stickers are also examples of mixed content creation: The quote 'Silly poor people, money is for rich people' is attributed to Mitt Romney and is a well-known internet meme. The drawings are characters from old US commercials from the 1940s, which are copyright-free today. The author of the drawings is unknown. Using the language of advertisements and transforming them into ironic announcements is common in the Polish street sticker scene. The drawing in sticker (8) is made by the author in the style of the famous comic book artist Mike Mignola.

d) workaholism, overworking, burnout

| 10 | 11 |

These two stickers address overworking and burnout as social problems, along with the false solution of 'the happy pill'. Both stickers use mixed content, combining drawings from old 1950s US editorial commercials with the author's text. 'Fuckitall' (11) is a sarcastic name for an imaginary antidepressant drug. Sticker (10) depicts a polite way for management to ask their employees to 'kindly work their asses off'.

e) existential crisis, impostor syndrome

WE LOSE OURSELVES SO EASILY IN RELATIONSHIPS,
CIRCUMSTANCES, FAMILIES, CAREERS, AND ENDLESS GOAL-
DIGGING THAT WE FORGET WHO WE ARE ALONG THE WAY.

12

FOCUSING ON SOMEONE ELSE'S ACHIEVEMENTS
WILL NOT BRING YOU THE SAME FORTUNE.

13

These are also mixed content stickers, but this time the drawings are made by the author – inspired by a photograph and a scene from a short, animated movie. The text in sticker (12) is a sentence from a life coaching blog. The text in sticker (13) is written by the author, based on various popular inspirational quotes.

REALIZE THAT EVERYONE IS ON THEIR OWN
PATH, AND YOU HAVE MADE MANY CHOICES
TO BRING YOU TO WHERE YOU ARE.

14

TIRED
OF BEING
TIRED

CUZ BEING TIRED IS
TIRING

15

ALWAYS BLAME
SOMEONE ELSE

16

Sticker (14) is a combination of mixed content where the picture is a digital sketch for one of the author's acrylic paintings, and the text is a mixture of inspirational quotes. The painting titled 'Corpoblood' with a size of 70 × 70 cm portrays the idea of working one's way up in a typical corporation.

BORED
OF BEING
BORED

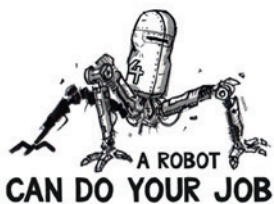CUZ BEING BORED IS
BORING

17

CALM DOWN
YOU DONT MATTER.

18

YOU ARE
MISLEADING
ADVERTISMENT
OF YOURSELF.

19

Stickers (18) and (19) address the issue of impostor syndrome.

2. Technological singularity

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

Stickers (24), (25), and (26) present the idea of technological singularity in various ways: the new AI self-conscious mind will treat people as a lower life form (22). New robotic machines will be superior to us on all levels, doing everything a human did better, faster, and cheaper – 'I'll do it better' (24). To survive, humans have to accept transhumanism and become one with the machine, discarding the flesh (21), (25), and (26). Stickers (20) and (24) address the problem of unemployment caused by robotic implementation in factory assembly lines.

3. Secularism and anti-religion

27

28

29

The stickers express the author's personal views on religion in general, and in particular, the role of the Catholic Church in Poland. Sticker (27) features the author's

drawing of Archbishop Stanisław Dziwisz, the former personal secretary of Pope John Paul II, with the text 'Don Stanislao doesn't remember anything.'[2] Sticker (28) expresses support for the 'All Polish Women's Strike' protest movement.[3] Sticker (29) conveys the author's personal anti-religion views in general.

These stickers express the author's personal views on religion in general and in particular the role of the Catholic Church in Poland. Sticker (27), 'Don Stanislao doesn't remember anything', is the author's drawing of Archbishop Stanisław Dziwisz, the former personal secretary of Pope John Paul II. Sticker (28) supports the 'All Polish Women's Strike' protest movement. Sticker (29) presents the author's personal anti-religion views in general.

4. Kafkaesque

The Kafkaesque stickers address the bureaucratic absurdity of modern society with an ironic approach. Stickers (30) and (31) describe the 'opening times' of an imaginary institution that offers 'feigned actions' and 'renouncing reality'. Sticker (32) is mixed content, with the drawing taken from a 1950s editorial advertisement and the text created by the author ('The dear committee is taking important decisions').

---

2   The text refers to the denial of the archbishop any memory of reported paedophile cases to the Pope in a famous interview for TVN channel on 20.10.2020. 'Don Stanislao' was the nickname the Italian staff called the archbishop when he was living in the Vatican.

3   The **All-Poland Women's Strike** or **Polish Women's Strike** (Polish: *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*, **OSK**) is a women's rights social movement in Poland, established in September 2016. It was set up in protest against the rejection by the Parliament of Poland of the 'Save Women' bill, which was considered by the Sejm in parallel to the 'Stop Abortion' project. The movement was responsible for the organization of Black Monday, a protest action, involving various forms of strike, that took place simultaneously in 147 Polish cities, towns, and villages (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-Poland_Women%27s_Strike).

5. Philosophical

REALITY IS SUBJECTIVE
33

EXISTENCE IS UNPROVEN
34

THE UNIVERSE IS UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO MAKE SENSE TO YOU.
35

YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE EXPERIENCING ITSELF.
36

WE SIMULATE OURSELVES FOR EACHOTHER.
37

LIFE IS MEANINGLESS. NOTHING YOU DO MATTERS. YOU ARE JUST ONE INDIVIDUAL AMONG SPECIES OF PRIMATE WITH BILLIONS OF RELATIVES LIVING ON A TINY ROCK IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE.
38

The philosophical stickers represent the author's views on cosmology and the question of our understanding of the nature of our existence, based loosely on some of the latest theories in quantum physics. Some of the stickers are mixed content: the graphic symbols of stickers (33) and (34) are copyright-free icons representing the concept of a universe, combined with the author's text. Sticker (35) is the author's drawing based on a movie character with a quote from Neil deGrasse Tyson. Sticker (37) presents a concept of the scientific explanation of how communication between the eyes and the brain functions, and sticker (38) is mixed content: a scan of the author's acrylic painting combined with a popular meme quote.

VI. The space of implementation

In the realm of street art culture, there exists a distinction between the various types of public spaces where street art is placed. As Karolina Izdebska notes in her monograph, the public status of urban areas can vary, and the audience of a space is determined by its social use. This implies that some private spaces, such as clubs and cafes, may have a greater potential as public spaces than some urban areas that are typically thought of as public by definition. As such, becoming a part of street art culture involves more than simply placing stickers in open street areas; it requires a keen understanding of the social context in which the art is being displayed. 'The boundaries between public and private spaces can be fluid, and the public status of a space is defined by action. *Espai public*, or public space, is

a space of public life that consists of common places, some of which are public spaces, and some of which are private.' (Izdebska, 2021, p. 106).

In the context of street art, the placement of stickers plays a significant role in their effectiveness in conveying a message. While public street areas are commonly used for sticker placement, not all areas are equally suitable for this purpose. As noted by Karolina Izdebska, the audience of a space is determined by its social use, and not all spaces may have the potential to effectively engage the public with street art stickers. Furthermore, not all members of the audience may be receptive to the messages conveyed by street art stickers, which can limit their effectiveness in communicating the intended message.

Moreover, street artists may be selective in their placement of stickers, preferring to choose specific locations or objects that better align with the message they are trying to convey. By doing so, they can create a more cohesive and effective communication strategy that resonates with their target audience. This targeted approach can also help to avoid dilution of the message, as stickers that are placed randomly may be viewed as disconnected from the intended message or the larger context of the artist's work. Thus, careful consideration of placement is an important aspect of creating impactful and meaningful street art stickers.

a) Public areas

b) Private areas

As Karolina Izdebska writes, the accessibility of the space is a matter of careful choice: 'The question remains whether the physical accessibility of the work translates into its comprehension by a wider audience. In the case of public art accessibility, it is also important to overcome certain barriers related to the reception of the artistic message. This touches upon the issue of cultural and artistic competences. Cultural competence refers to a set of features that predispose an individual to learn about culture, as well as the way of using knowledge and developed skills. Artistic competences are a subordinate category to cultural competences, specifically concerning patterns and the ability to interpret works of art, and are creative in nature, giving individuals the ability to create new patterns, interpretations, and more.' (Izdebska, 2021)

In the context of street art and sticker culture, the physical availability of a space is of secondary importance. Instead, the primary criterion for choosing a space to place stickers is its emotional and intellectual availability. For example, restrooms in pubs may be a suitable option for sticker placement, but the majority of the stickers created by Noemi are given to colleagues, students, and friends. This suggests that the choice of space is influenced not only by the potential visibility of the sticker but also by the intended audience and their receptiveness to the message.

VII. Artistic expression and the therapeutical function of the process of creation

My role, as an *artist-reporter*, is to collect significant information about important issues and selectively present them in the form of an artistic metaphor without making judgments, as stated by Izdebska (2021, p. 386). The information I present on social issues is in the form of ironic commentary on reality, without explicitly explaining the cause of the problem or proposing solutions. My objective is to increase public awareness of these issues.

Regarding the colour palette of the stickers, I generally keep it to a minimum, with the exception of those that incorporate my acrylic paintings. The intent is to maintain simplicity and create a strong visual impact using black-and-white symbols with bold, capitalised text. This approach is intended to convey a sense of urgency, as if issuing a warning.

In addition to their primary purpose of creating social impact, the creation process of the stickers also serves as an artistic expression and has therapeutic benefits for the creator. The process of cutting out the final form of a sticker is done manually and can result in slight variations in each individual piece. If the first step in the creation of a sticker is mostly (but not always) an analogue sketch, then the cutting is the final part of the production process and is, again,

an analogue work. This step of the creation process takes hours and is a calm and meditative activity.

The act of placing the stickers in various locations, including semi-public and private spaces, has a liberating effect on the creator. While the messages themselves address global social issues, the decision of which ones to present in sticker form is a personal one. Issues such as burnout and depression are often seen as affecting others, rather than acknowledging their relevance to oneself.

Despite being perceived by some as a 'nerdish' concept, the rapid development of AI technology in 2022 has made it clear that the technological singularity is a very real and near-future phenomenon. Governmental control and surveillance have become commonplace in 'first-world' western societies, akin to the 'boiling frog' analogy.

Women's rights remain a global problem but are often deprioritised with the belief that they will be addressed once more 'urgent issues' have been resolved.

Our contemporary era, as characterised by the Chinese proverb 'May you live in interesting times', is marked by a host of pressing global issues including warfare, poverty, hunger, and environmental disasters. In light of these overwhelming problems, the stickers produced by Noemis draw attention to the insidious issues that gradually undermine the wellbeing of society from within. These issues are often suppressed, with individuals waiting for an opportune moment to address them. However, such procrastination can lead to chronic diseases that become hidden within society. Protests, in response to these issues, can take a variety of forms, including fluid, forceful, snappy, arrogant, provocative, or humorous. The entire process of sticker creation can be viewed as a civic act that consists of conception, production, and execution, and functions as a form of societal revolt that arises when there is a need for repair (Emelife, 2022, p.13).

As an author, I am personally touched by the topics I choose to address in my work. It is through my creative process that I aim to develop an awareness and understanding of these issues, ultimately choosing the appropriate course of action. The stickers produced by Noemis can be classified as protest art, which, similar to other forms of street art, prioritises social impact over artistic expression.

In addition to their aesthetic value and contribution to street art culture, the primary purpose of Noemis' stickers, like other forms of protest or socially engaged art, is to prompt the viewer to reflect on their perspective regarding the issues depicted. The intention is to provoke and question, with the aim of encouraging individuals to reconsider their stance on these issues, even if only briefly.

Creating street art and exhibiting it in public spaces is a particularly honest form of artistic expression, as the artwork is exposed to criticism that can sometimes take the form of destruction. Street art, often executed without permission

from authorities, straddles the boundary between art and vandalism, for which street artists can face legal repercussions. As a trained architect, I have a deep appreciation for the architectural heritage of the city. Living in the old town, I observe acts of vandalism towards historical buildings that I cannot classify as street art. However, this is not solely a matter of new versus old architecture. I always treat every urban environment with respect when implementing a sticker. The implementation stage is the final act of the creative process and requires decisions about how to 'occupy' public space. With this step, the artist's work is complete, and the public begins to consume the result of the artist's creation.

References:

Izdebska, K. (2001). *Sztuka publiczna. Od obiektów do praktyk postartystycznych. Brikolaż socjologiczny*, Wydawnictwo naukowe Scholar Sp. z o.o., Warsaw.

Emelife, A. (2022). *A Brief History of Protest Art*, Tate Publishing, London.

Simoniti, V. (2018). 'Assessing Socially Engaged Art', The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 76: 71–82, doi:10.1111/jaac.12414.